7

ARIFURETA SHOKUGYOU DE SEKAISAIKYOU

7

ARIFURETA SHOKUGYOU DE SEKAISAIKYOU

Arifureta Shokugyou de Sekai Saikyou

(ありふれた職業で世界最強)

From Common Job Class to the Strongest in the World

Chuuni Suki

(厨二好き)

Story Description:

Among the class that was transported to another world, Nagumo Hajime is an ordinary male student who doesn't have ambition nor aspiration in life, called by his classmates as "Incompetent". The class is summoned to become heroes and save a country from destruction, students of these class are blessed with cheat specs and cool job class, but that's not the case with Hajime, his job class is a "Synergist" and his stats are very normal (mediocre). "Synergist", to put it in another word is just artisan class. Being the weakest, he then falls to the depth of the abyss when he and his classmates are exploring a dungeon. What did he find in the depth of the abyss and can he survive?

Original Story can be found here: Link

Arc VII

Chapter 136 : Shunee Snowfield

Chapter 137 : Snow and Ice Cave

Chapter 138 : Frost Turtle

Chapter 139 : Labyrinth

Chapter 140 : Whispering voice

Chapter 141 : The Brunt of Feelings

Chapter 142 : One More Self

Chapter 143 : Shizuku's True Feelings

Credits

Chapter 136 : Shunee Snowfield

As always, this is a not a direct translation, but a rewrite on my interpretation of the MTLs. All credit goes to the original author Chuuni Suki

*

Gliding across the clouds and glistening in the sunlight, the airship Ferner could be seen unopposed in the sky.

“As far as the eye can see it’s an ocean of clouds.” Shia muttered while looking outside the window of the bridge.

“…. the Shunee (Schnee) snowfield is always covered in an overcast sky. The outside is frigid.” Yue explained while nodding.

The Shunee snowfield and Risen Large Canyon divided the south continent in half. On the eastern side sat the heavy snow field, which was covered in cloudy weather throughout the year, so even during periods when it doesn’t snow, the earth remains smothered in snow and ice.

East of the Sea of Trees caught between the demon country of Garland and the southern continent is this mysterious place. Strangely, neither the Sea of Trees nor the country of Garland are touched by snow or ice, as if the boundary was cut with an impassible wall.

The interior of the snowfield houses a considerably large gorge, likely formed from the ice and the snow. The last of the large labyrinths should be at the tip of the gorge, the Shunee Snow Cave. Normally, an adventurer would be worn down by the cold on their way towards reaching the tip, making it a perfect location for the labyrinth.

Hajime had known of the snow cave’s location ever since his conversation with Miredi. Make no mistake, he understood it was a great labyrinth. However, a super convenient tool named airship allowed him to skim over the clouds in relative comfort.

“Master, is the compass working properly?” Tio asked.

Hajime was holding a compass the size of his palm in one hand.

He had received it from Luluo Haltina, a compass designed with concept magic to show him “the place he desired”. In which case, it was pointed straight for the Shunee cave with pinpoint accuracy.

“Ah. It’s okay. This is wonderful. The needle doesn’t just face in the direction I want, I also get a sense of the exact location and distance as well, somehow.”

“Is that so? So it seems to understand where the place is specifically. It must be hard to describe how that works.”

Kaori agreed with Hajime’s words of admiration. When they were in Fair Bergen, he tried an experiment by marking specific coordinates using the compass. The exact geo-location was determined in some complicated way. The power of this concept magic was shocking; he rejoiced that he could even feel the existence of his hometown in Japan.

Of course, the coordinates vanished as the power demands increased exponentially. The consumption of magic increased proportionally to the distance of what you’re looking for. To locate a coordinate on Earth, all of Hajime’s power was used in one go. Fortunately, he barely avoided fainting by supplementing his power just before it dried up.

Shia returned from the window, approaching the sofa where Hajime was sitting. To Hajime’s right, Yue always clung. The left side was the place that Shia had originally sat. So she abandoned the window and hopped over, a perplexed look on her face.

As Hajime watched her suspiciously from the side, Shia appeared nervous and fidgety. She seemed to feel nervous now that Hajime had formally begun to treat her as his lover, becoming more embarrassed at unreservedly clinging to him.

Hajime’s expression softened at the appearance of the beautiful figure of Shia, grabbing her hand and pulling her to sit next to himself.

“Ah...”

“Don’t be embarrassed now, we’ve already been seen.”

“... Shia is cute.”

Hajime laughed as Shia wore an amazed expression, meanwhile Yue warmly spoke while having narrowed eyes. Though Kaori was giving an envious look, she also noded in agreement at Yue's words.

Tio gave a perverted smile while moving to sit across from Shia on another sofa.

"Kuku... certainly Shia has become cuter. So how was your first night? Was it painful... or did it feel good? Why don't you let us know? Hora... hora... let us know..."

"What are you saying? It's impossible to answer!"

"What is it? So Master's performance was so poor you can't say? Yes?"

"That isn't true! Instead it was amazing... many times... wait, what are you getting me to say!"

As Shia was suggesting, during their last night in Fair Bergen, Shia and Hajime has spent the night together. Yue had prevented any peeping toms, including a certain Sea of Trees princess she needed to spank, which left the princes writhing in ecstasy on the ground.

Shia covered her face with her hands, hiding her shame. It seemed to have various meanings after her impactful first night. It was an inevitability, as you could say Hajime was a warrior with a long military service. Needless to say, it was Yue who turned him into the super soldier he was today.

While licking her lips, Yue gave a bewitching smile that suggested that with "three of them" the erotic vampire princess would be "included next time", her eyes showing her worldly desires. While holding Shia, he glanced over at the companion he had turned, and gave Tio a demonic flick on the forehead.

Pow! It hit with a terrific sound, and everyone continued to ignore Tio as she writhed on the floor wearing an expression of ecstasy.

"It'd be good if we could finish the great labyrinths. I want to meet up with Myuu again soon."

To avoid the embarrassing mood, Shia changed the subject while wearing a bright expression and laughing in desperation, but Hajime quickly moved things back on target.

"In addition, we should make time for Kam (TN: Her father)."

"Hajime..."

Hajime gently patted Shia's head, his eyes wrought with worry. Shia shook her head with a soft smile to reassure him.

As a matter of fact, Hajime had offered to take Kam with them when he left for Earth shortly after they had fought the empire, but received a curt reply. As he had predicted, Kam and rest of them had answered no, determined to protect the name of the Haulia tribe and fight until the bitter end.

It was decided then that Shia would separate from her family. Hajime gave a sigh. He was unable to refute Kam, who gave a happy smile while saying "It's enough if you keep Shia happy", which showed his resolve as a father. It may end up being possible to come and go between worlds; however, they did not yet know the limits of the concept magic, and it was also possible that the mad gods may interfere, making it extremely difficult. Moreover, he wanted to spend his last days in this world with family.

Shia sympathized with his feelings, showing him a bright smile.

"I've said my goodbyes to father, and although it breaks my heart, I'm happy, and I'll be even more happy in the future."

"Is that so?"

"Yes! Fufu... I realized this when I saw you with Myuu, you're overprotective when it comes to family, you know."

Shia gave an amused laugh under her breath, matching Yue's bright look while mischievously embracing Hajime's arm.

"... Nn, we mustn't depend on Hajime's kindness too much."

"Ahaha, certainly, it won't be good if we depend too much on Hajime."

To Kaori, who wore a sulky expression while looking around uncomfortably, Hajime could say nothing as he came off more like a womanizer.

The side door opened, and Kouki's group entered. Kouki and the rest had been training using the artifacts Hajime had provided them, and it seemed like they were taking a break. They took seats in another sofa, while ignoring Tio, whom had a swollen forehead and a gross look on her face.

"So, how are the artifacts, are you getting used to them?"

"Ah, it's surprising. The output has been doubled, the added benefits will be very useful."

To Hajime's question, Kouki wore a complicated expression while patting the holy sword sitting at his waist, acknowledging the increase in strength.

"While being able to walk through the air is odd, it's seriously amazing. It will be really useful once we get used to it, not even mentioning the ability to increase and decrease weight."

"Suzu also is extremely pleased with it. It seems far easier to use now. Thank you, Hajime-kun!"

"I also have no problems. If anything, I'm afraid it's too strong. However, we won't know anything until we've managed to get some actual combat experience."

Everyone seemed to be satisfied with the modified artifacts that Hajime had prepared. They all had a suitable fighting spirit for tackling the last dungeon, especially for Suzu, whose eagerness to meet Eri once again was shown.

"That's good. Your fighting strength should increase by several times if you can master your new skills, make every effort before you find yourself being pressed in the demon territory."

Though Hajime gave off a curt attitude, the power he had given them was the real thing. With him helping Suzu reach her objectives, Suzu and

the rest of the party's opinion on Hajime was that of a "Tsundere", but they didn't say anything because he was still a little scary.

At this time, Hajime's gaze unexpectedly snapped forward towards his target. The mood shifted from relaxed to serious.

"... Did we arrive?" Yue asked.

"Ah, it's time to descend."

At Hajime's command, Ferner rushed into the sea of clouds, and everyone's gaze turned serious as they looked out of the windows.

After only a few seconds of descending through white clouds, Ferner was instantly enveloped with a snow storm cold enough to freeze the hull in an instant.

"That's certainly severely cold, as you said, that is not this mistress' forte."

Tio grumbled while trembling and staring at the silvery landscape enveloped with blizzard with an unpleased eye.

"Everyone, hold on to the artifact I'm handing you, it will help protect you against the cold which will help greatly in surviving this labyrinth."

"... Nn, anything Hajime handmade, wonderful."

"That's true, the part with the snow crystal motif is beautiful."

"This is my third present from Hajime... ehehe."

"... Master, why just a tiny snowman? Although it's cute by itself, I was hoping for an accessory with a more elaborate design."

Each pendant artifact that Hajime handed out offered protection from the cold. There were a snow crystal motif made from a translucent light blue stone embedded in an elaborate design that seemed to absorb the light.

Only Tio received a pendant which had a snowman on it, wearing an American-like smile with cheerful features. She gave a wistful expression as she compared her pendant to everyone else's.

“When you do something about your inclinations, I’ll present you with something better.”

“Is that to say this lowly mistress… is not worth a womanly present…? It’s too cruel, Master. The gap, the unpleasantness is too painful. Please give this mistress a nicer present!”

“… so it’s decided that you won’t fix your behavior…?”

Suzu and Shizaku give each other a look of amazement as Tio embraced Hajime while wearing a look as if she’s about to cry.

“… Shizu, Shizu, aren’t these just rocks? In that case, wouldn’t a snowman be much better?”

“Suzu, please don’t point out such a difference in treatment, because it’s too sad…”

“Is that so? If it’s effective, what’s the problem?”

“… Ryuutaro, I don’t think that’s what it’s about.”

In Shizuku’s hand was nothing but a common rock you could pick up anywhere, apart from its ability to protect against the cold. The dejected Suzu and Shizuku had slumped shoulders after comparing their pendants to the ones the other girls had received. For once, Kouki was actually able to read the mood, unlike normal. (TN: In other words, Hajime gave Shia, Yue, and Kaori beautiful gems, gave Tio an unromantic snowman, and gave Shizuku and Suzu a rock, lol.)

In the meantime, Ferner reached the Gorge of Ice and Snow, where the entrance to the ice and snow cave likely lead to the great labyrinth.

While operating Ferner, Hajime navigated the forge using far sight, and while it normally would have taken a while to locate it, with the help of Ferner that time was cut significantly. However, upon reaching the end of the gorge, the cave entrance was yet to be seen.

“… Nn? Does it end here? The compass says it’s still further ahead.”

“… Hajime, look.”

“At what?”

Yue pointed at the crystal display that showed the surroundings, activating a zoom function. Hajime looked at where she indicated, finding that the width of the gorge apparently narrowed up ahead. The ice and snow had piled up, creating a huge domed passage, leading towards the inside.

"There is no other way. It's about a kilometer until the cave. Looks like we're walking from here."

"This is the first time I've seen the snow, it looks like it might be fun."

Out of everyone who began moving at Hajime's orders, only Shia appeared to be excited. She was like a child on a train who climbs onto their seat to look outside as they pass by the silvery landscape.

Though this was similar to the time that Shia had first seen the ocean, how Hajime looked at her was different. A Shia with her rabbit ears waving about extravagantly as she frolicked around with a child-like innocence was far too adorable. He seemed to want to hug her tightly, and it was necessary for him to hold himself back.

While scratching his head, hajimei concentrated on guiding Ferner into the depths of the ravine which was quickly becoming too narrow to land properly.

Hajime opened the lower hatch on the outside... and was immediately attacked by large swaths of snow coming up into his face. The artifact that protected against the cold did not provide any barrier, it only kept the person's temperature within a constant and suitable range. While trying not to become blinded, he hurriedly covered himself with a coat.

"Waa, is this snow? It's hard and fluffy!"

As such, Shia lone became excited. While her body was pummeled with the snow storm, she was busy stamping her feet and scooping it up without reservation, her eyes full of enjoyment.

"Oi, Shia. Let's go, you're getting too excited... Oi, are you listening?"

As Shia frolicked, she appeared to not hear the words of admonishment Hajime was giving her. Instead, she played in the pure-white snow that

lay thickly about energetically while raising her voice.

"And she fell into an abyss, as it was..."

As Shia dives in the snow, the ground collapses under her while Hajime mutters something in a narrator's voice while turning scornful eyes to the newly formed massive crevasse that opens into a deep hole.

Shia had fallen into a crack in the earth while letting out a scream "Ahhh!!!" There was a fissure that ran along the gorge, but the accumulated snow had made it impossible to notice.

"Will you settle down before Shia dies? Hey! Shiaaaa!"

The dumbfounded Shizuku and Suzu began to fall into a panic while making pale faces. Meanwhile, Kouki and Ryuutaro were at a loss for words given the situation.

"Settle down, Shia won't be defeated by a fall like that. Besides, we need to get down there too."

Hajime waves it away like it was nothing and then jumped the 400 meters down into the crevasse after Shia without a moment's hesitation. Yue also jumped after them.

Everyone was provided with an artifact that provided the effect of aerodynamic, which provided them a method of reducing their rate of fall. Of course, Suzu could put up an energy-absorbing effect. There shouldn't be a problem for Kouki's group, although it went against common sense to leap off a cliff.

Suzu group peeked over the ravine quiet and watery eyed at the thought of jumping off the edge.

"What are you hesitating for? There is no time to hesitate! Aren't you making a better effort?"

Tio couldn't stand waiting behind them and thus gave a push in both the emotional and physical sense. With the feeling of being pushed like a bungee jumper without a rope, Suzu is forcefully pushed.

"Wait, I'll go, because I'll go – Suzu is a person who can do it if you do it,

just let me go at my own pace!”

“The day grows darker as you say things like that. Look, come here.”

“Yaa... wait, please don’t life me. I’ll do it myself, I’ll go myselfffff....”

Tio lifted Suzu and then threw her like trash towards the bottom of the ravine. The scream thins as she falls down the ravine, her voice echoing magnificently.

Tio turns around and give Kouki a smile as he turns pale. That smile eloquently told them all, “Who dies next?”

“Yaegashi Shizuku. I’m off!”

Saying so as if trying to avoid being thrown, Shizuku leaps from the cliff with a beautiful form like a diver jumping into a pool.

Kouki and Ryuutaro let out a “Uoo!” and “Brave!” before passing Tio and jumping into the ravine with a shout.

“Umu, it’s good to be energetic, isn’t it?” Tio nods before jumping over the side herself.

———

“Calm down, Suzu. Don’t cry!”

Barely contained tears echo across the gorge of ice and snow.

Suzu was shaking, and it seemed that her fall was only stopped desperately. Actually, the true reason she was crying was that she seemed to have wet herself a little, but that was something she couldn’t say.

Shizuku, Kouki, and Ryuutaro tried to comfort her, however, the three people had little strength left after their own experience bungee jumping without a rope.

“Suzu, it’s so soft... cute.”

“Please don’t do that to comfort yourself.”

Hajime tsukomi’d while giving Suzu, who seemed like a small animal under Kaori’s care, a look.

At that point, a dogon noise came from the corner of the wall near the bottom of the ravine where Hajime stood, followed by a shout “Uryaaa!!”

A part of the wall had collapsed with a roaring sound. There, Shia strolls out calmly with Doryukken propped on her shoulder.

“Iya... to be caught by such a cunning trapped, my innocence was played with! *cough*”

“Are you stupid? Though it’s not the great labyrinth, it’s still dangerous here, don’t forget it!”

“Ah... sorry... I got a little carried away...”

With a deceptive smile, Hajime rapped Shia on the head with his knuckles while scolding her. As she dropped her shoulders dejectedly, he grabs her cheek and gives a muni.

While punishing Shia’s cheek with one hand, he held the compass with the other. The compass indicated which road to follow from a branch up ahead.

“Come on guys, don’t stand around engrossed in your own world forever, let’s go.” Hajime shouted and Suzu seemed to regain her lost energy, nodding with renewed vigor.

Everything in the surrounding area was covered with ice and snow, and the water didn’t flow. Is everything frozen? Even with the snow storm in the valley above, the cold chill blew through, making a moderate temperature seem impossible.

If they didn’t have the artifacts to ward against the cold, just how much of their physical strength would be cut down. When the night falls, it could reach as low as -30, if not lower.

Lumps of ice and icicles that seemed to grow from the ground appeared more and more the farther they advanced. The wind also seemed to blow stronger, and the temperature continued to drop.

“This is a little troubling.” Tio wore a difficult expression and stood with some difficulty.

“It should be within 500 meters. It’s dangerous with the snow fluttering around and obstructing our views. Tio, can you please disperse the wind?”

“Understood.”

At Hajime’s request, Tio gathered her magic to avert the wind to the left and right. However, before she executed it, an objection was voiced.

“Wait, that, let Suzu do it!”

That’s right, Suzu.

With a fighting spirit, Suzu grasped onto two iron-ribbed fans that were the new artifacts Hajime had created.

The fans had been imbued with age of god magic much like the way Shizuku’s sword had been modified. Particularly, using the newly obtained sublimation magic, magic formations were carved into the iron-ribbed fan and evolved accordingly.

Though she had practiced on the deck of the Ferner, was it enough to use the fans properly? It had a magic absorbing function too. Using it while paying attention to the magic usage was a good idea to reduce the consumption of magic.

Tio gave Hajime a questioning look, and he gave a nod in acceptance.

“Yosh, then let’s do it! Sacred Shield!”

As soon as Suzu recited the magic’s name, a translucent barrier surrounded them with watery light. The barrier drew a curve loosely towards the front, generating a ripple of light that was beaten fast from the central portion of the outside.

The sacred shield was defensive magic, providing the ability to distribute energy of an object that comes into contact with it. One of the features of the fan was the ability to create the barrier without chanting. The strength of the shield was middle class for the sake of efficacy.

According to Suzu’s plan, when the snow and wind hit the barrier, the power is dispersed and thrown to the side, softening it to a gentle breeze.

“... Nn. It’s not bad.” Yue gave her impression after seeing Suzu’s

barrier.

The saint barrier was evolved magic from sublimation, seeming to the level where even a genius like Yue was willing to acknowledge it. Suzu smiled broadly from the compliment.

With the storm averted, their continued movement became much easier. As Hajime continued on, he suddenly halted, gazing forward with squinted eyes.

"... Is that it?"

When they followed Hajime's look, there was a crack with a beautiful isosceles triangle at the tip of the dead end. The needle of the compass pointed straight ahead. So this was the cave of ice and snow.

"It looks like we're here, but Hajime..."

"Ah, I get it, everyone prepare yourself. Something is coming!"

Shia's eyes lowered dangerously, while her rabbit ears danced around. She detected two or more signs of something in the darkness of the cave. While Yue, Kaori, and Tio remained relaxed as usual, tension ramped up with Kouki and the others.

Immediately...

"Ggigigigigigigi." X5

While giving a strange yell, a demon with a strange body came out of the cave, moving around fiercely.

With an appearance like a gorilla covered in white hair, it stood three meters high and walked on two legs, unlike a gorilla.

You could go so far as to say,

"Yeti? [TN: They call it big foot. Not the abominable snowman, or better yet, a Yeti. I'm changing it to Yeti.]

"As you would expect... in a parallel world, meeting UMA of a snow mountain in a place like this..."

Koari wore a stiff smile, while Hajime slipped Donner out while

muttering, however, this time Shizuku stopped him.

“Nagumo-kun. Though it’s bad, please let us take of this ourselves. Kouki… Ryuutaru. Suzu!”

“Yeah!”

“Good, let’s do this!”

“We absolutely won’t lose!”

Kouki and the rest rushed out ahead after taking Shizuku’s order. They actually wanted to acquire actual combat experience using the new artifacts though Kaori seemed to want to help out.

Hajime, standing next to Yue, only shrugged, content watching them. Only Kaori came off as anxious, her hands grasped like she was praying.

“Wake up, Black Sword.”

In front of Hajime, Shizuku recited the invocation in a loud voice, drawing out the first attack.

“Tear it up, flying claws!”

The ability flying air claws was executed, and it approached the Yeti with a deathly invisible attack, however, the yeti seemed to move with animal intuition. They spread out like ninja’s, evading the attack completely.

However, Shizuku seemed to have assumed they’d dodge from the beginning.

“Suzu!”

“Understood, leave it to us!”

In a flash, Kouki and Suzu moved to intercept the return strike while the magic Suzu cast struck the earth under the nearest Yeti.

“Heavy barrier, Heavy Saint!”

The iron-ribbed fan turned with a glitter, a spheroidal barrier shining brightly around the earth under the Yeti. It was not a barrier to prevent the attack, but a barrier to confine the Yeti.

After being confined in a dome, it tried to break free by tearing at it with his claws.

At that point, a shadow appeared over Suzu, another Yeti came jumping, though Kaori had seen it coming and tried to yell a warning, Suzu's magic had already been executed.

"Swallow barrier burst!"

A barrier extending one meter on all sides appeared overhead of Suzu, and the Yeti swung downward after, with a Gyari noise that was blocked by the barrier.

And, and that moment...

Dogoon!!

The barrier exploded magnificently with an effective roar. Without Suzu's influence, the barrier maintained its directionality, the orange magic rippling as the scattered remains of the barrier split overhead.

The Yeti's body is torn by the remains of the barrier as it breaks on impact. It's somehow blown away nearly ten meters while shedding blood. Though it gave a bloodshot look burning with anger as it turns to Suzu, it waits more cautiously. No... more likely it is having trouble moving after the impact.

Anyway, because the left iron-ribbed fan was given an "impact conversion" aspect to its barrier formation, the Yeti was repelled. So to speak... it was an invocation known as barrier burst.

On the other side, the Yeti that was still caught in the heavy barrier had not received any damage, but was forced to the ground thanks to the heavy gravity magic, the doubled effect sealing off his movements.

Suzu was firmly suppressing two Yetis, gripping her iron fans with vigilance against the other advancing Yeti.

Shizuku took a roundabout path using high-speed movement from behind the Yeti. She accelerated the drawn sword, slipping it from the scabbard using the skill, drawn out. You couldn't even see the blade, only

the black tracks flecking through the air.

“Giiii.” {Tn: Isn’t this the same noise the cockroaches make? Why does a Yeti sound like a cockroach?}

The speed was such that he was still left with a rough cut at his back, although the Yeti evaded, narrowly avoiding a mortal wound.

Innumerable icicles suddenly exploded from the ground surrounding Shizuku. Apparently the Yeti had a peculiar ice manipulation magic.

Though Shizuku evaded the icicles by jumping away, they dashed out from the ground and pursued her like missiles.

On the other hand, Shizuku chanted while crossing her black sword with its sheath.

“Meet Pulling Heaven!”

When the icicle splinters flew at Shizuku, they changed orbit to meet the blade and sheath of the black sword, as if they were attracted to a magnet, unable to reach Shizuku’s body.

“Fly Heavenly separation!”

All of the icicles that came in succession to Shizuku unite in the air as they returned.

Pulling Heaven and Heavenly Separation used the practice of gravity magic to pull things apart.

The shot ended up returning to the Yeti who had casted it, but even with its movement dulled from the wound on its back, it managed to evade it, sliding its feet over the ice.

“... Somehow... that looks professional.”

Shizuku mutters while she lands. As she stated, the Yeti was creating a road of ice as he slid, moving as he swung his arms forward in a bent posture resembling that of a speed skater. His velocity increased drastically.

The Yeti confronting Kouki were also sliding around the bottom of the

ravine, using beautiful forms like that of skaters while creating ice as they went, probably making up for the dulled movements.

Three of the Yeti back away and little and form a row, even their arm moves synchronize completely as they approach with a sound that gives a forceful feeling.

“If they come from the front, it’s only convenient.”

Kouki comes up beside Shizuku. The light from his holy sword focusses and he gives a posture with a haughty attitude.

And,

“Take this, Soaring Heights!”

The deadly attack draws a shining curve, the release lead to an impact that scattered across the surroundings.

The deadly attack did not boast the full power. Even if the original power of the holy sword was enough to destroy the Yeti. The power doesn’t change even if Kouki shouts the technique. At that moment, the Yeti seemed to evade the attack in an unbelievable method.

“A triple axel?” Kouki leaks out a voice of disbelief.

Exactly as stated, the Yeti performed a triple axel in response to the deadly attack, avoiding a direct impact. The three Yeti united as a row only changed at that moment, jumping in a quite artistic and effective way.

The three yeti jump over Kouki’s strike while rotating... the attack missing by a fingernail, as their feet all landed in sync.

“!?”

“Uo!”

Shizuku and Kouki backed up some distance while preventing the flowing kick that followed.

“UraaaAA!!”

Ryuutaro approached from behind and struck out with his fist from the

side, eliciting a shockwave. However, the Yeti bent backwards, sliding on the newly created ice. The appearance of sliding both feet resembled a move from the famous ice skater, Ina Bauer.

“Are you kidding me?”

“Calm down, Kouki!”

Kouki, who was determined to capture the Great Labyrinth this time, was gritting his teeth as he fought against the first enemy.

The Yeti approached from three sides while making unpredictable moves that Kouki just could gage, continuing their assault. What is the best maneuver they had, the eight-rotation triple? Moreover, their hands expanded greatly, a huge excavator seemed to approach from every side.

“Ha... flashing bloom!”

Letting out a sigh towards the Yeti’s triumphant looks as they rotated around them, her excellent kinetic vision say and expression that seemed unpleasant. She drew her sword while muttering an incantation at the same time she jumped overhead using aerodynamic and urging Kouki to follow.

The three Yeti land in the place where Shizuku was a second prior. Cutting down with their claws, they landed magnificently, but those that landed were just two of them.

“Gigii?”

The third was cut in two by the flashing bloom, an ability that cut space itself.

“Look Kouki, Ryuutaro, ignore their strange movement and just finish them off quickly, I’m going to Suzu.”

“Ah... damn, such an enemy suddenly...”

Kouki dashed out in a poor mood while throwing out abusive language in response to Shizuku’s words. Meanwhile, Ryuutaro became accustomed to the movements of the Yeti, and he too began to corner one.

Shizuku approaches Suzu, who is holding steady against a Yeti covered

in wounds thanks to her manipulating barriers. The neck of a Yeti caught with Heavy barrier was cut momentarily.

Seeing that, Suzu releases the remainder of the Yeti from her barrier, and went looking for Kouki and Ryuutaro as they finished off the last two Yeti.

They wore refreshed expressions after having finally defeated the Yeti with a complete victory. Then they were greeted by Hajime wearing a strange smile.

“You know, guys, it might be interesting to take them to earth, we’d be famous for discovering the first ice skating Yeti!”

“You’re annoying, you joking demon… can’t we just leave them here?”

Kouki snaps. The first match finally came to an end by playing in earnest.

While Ryuutaro lets out a laugh and Kouki sighs, Hajime let’s out a shrug and turns away, stepping towards the cave. Shizuku told Kaori that “It was cool.” She gave a shameful gaze. Suzu send s Yue a look of expectation while being patted on the head with an “it was not bad” praise from an elder sister absent-mindedly. It seemed like the tiny girl who was like a dirty old man was secretly aiming at Yue.

“Well, then, let’s commence with the last Great Labyrinth.” Hajime’s words echoed across the gorge of ice and snow.

It was a line intended to focus everyone’s mind and forget about the ice-skating Yetis as they stepped into the last of the seven great labyrinths, the Ice and Snow Cave of Shunee Snowfield.

Chapter 137 : Snow and Ice Cave

As always, this is a not a direct translation, but a rewrite on my interpretation of the MTLs. All credit goes to the original author Chuuni Suki

***The translation technically refers to the enemies of humans as “devils” and monsters as “demons”. I refer to the devils as demons a bunch, so I changed the name of demons to monsters or creatures accordingly. It was easier than going back and trying to retroactively fix the distinction.

*

The last of the seven great labyrinths, The Cave of Ice and Snow… was like a house of mirrors.

The passage inside this large labyrinth was a considerable area, large enough for ten people to stand side by side. The walls made from ice possessed the transparency of crystal. Thanks to the reflections you could easily become confused as to the number of people present. The end result… a mysterious internal structure.

Although another thing could be said to contribute to this mysterious feeling. Within the cave… snow was always falling. Naturally, since it’s a cave, it doesn’t fall from the sky. The snow is blown through the cave, moving along the wind. However, it wasn’t blown in from the entrance, but blown out from within the recesses of the cave.

In addition, it couldn’t be called normal snow.

“I-a… I did it again.”

“Ryuutaro… you were told not to go out of the range of the magical barrier!”

A piece of snow was sticking to Ryuutaro’s cheek, causing it to swell and become red. So, this snow possessed a temperature as low as dry ice, causing immediate frostbite if it touched you.

With the wind blowing against them, even though Suzu had dispersed

the snow with her barrier, the distractions caused by the ice wall reflections resulted in people requiring treatments several times.

"A cave made of ice, with snow that causes frostbite, in a labyrinth named the Cave of Ice and Snow... I shudder to think what would happen without this artifact."

"You wouldn't have drinking water, that's for sure."

Shizuku muttered while taking out the small stone artifact that protected them from cold out of her pocket while Kaori agreed, splashing some water outside of the barrier. It froze as soon as it touched the air, making a bikibiki sound as it impacted into the wall. The flask would have already been frozen if they were entering normally.

"Certainly, though you could melt ice to make water, fire magic seems to be obstructed in this space, and would take considerable magic consumption to activate."

"... But, that doesn't apply to us."

When Tio answered Kaori's comment with a wry smile, Yue shook the pendant and ring at her chest while giving a shrug.

As Tio remarked, this Ice and Snow cave remarkably weakened the effect of fire magic. It would be a considerable hardship to use fire as a method to secure water by melting snow.

This didn't apply to Hajime's party thanks to the treasure warehouse where they stored all their supplies without being affected by temperature as well as the cold protection artifact that kept the surrounding area at a comfortable temperature.

"It's extremely useful, as cooking would become problematic."

While agreeing with Yue's comment, Hajime turned his gaze to the front.

Yue followed his gaze ahead, seeing a man buried among the wall of ice with closed eyes like he was sleeping. He seemed to have sat down after becoming tired with his back to the wall and then become frozen there.

With no visible injury, perhaps it was exhaustion from the cold?

“Hajime, somehow that corpse... doesn’t it seem strange?”

“Nn? ...Ah... now that you mention it, isn’t he buried perfectly in the wall.”

“Yeah, but did the wall of ice form over him while he was sitting there, or was he taken into the wall?”

Shia’s neck was tilted as she eyed the corpse buried in the ice wall with a suspicious look. Shia made a good point. Did the wall expand to cover him, or did it pull him into it?

“... There is no reaction to magic from the ice or the corpse, just to be sure, should we destroy it?”

They could have left it the way it was, because there was no reason not to. Hajime pulled out Donner, aimed it at the corpse, and pulled the trigger.

Bang! Bang!

A vivid brilliant red flash shot from Hajime through the forehead and heart of the man. It was even more brilliant than usual as a result of the sublimation magic.

Towards desecrating the dead, Kouki opened his mouth to complain, but then shut it again, having learned it was unproductive to try to complain.

After a few seconds of watching the corpse and the ice wall, there was no reaction. Hajime holstered Donner and urged the party to move ahead. ... Hajime and the party disappeared into the recesses of the cave after a moment.

Crack... Crack...

“Goo, Gao, gigi.”

A sound like a groaning voice came out as the ice formed cracks.

Not noticing what was happening behind them, Hajime and the party continued to traverse the labyrinth in silence.

Though the Ice and Snow cave had many branching paths, they didn't hesitate at any given intersection thanks to the compass. On their way along, the walls were littered with a lot more corpses trapped into the ice wall, but after a 1/3 the distance of the labyrinth, they had yet to see a single monster attack.

"Nn?... again?"

Another corpse was discovered buried in the ice wall in the passage ahead. With pointed ears and dark skin... it was a person from the demon country.

"... 50 people so far, most demons."

"Perhaps there were a large number of people that attempted to capture it with Freed?" Hajime answered Yue, who was standing alone and muttering to herself.

They couldn't tell from the clothing how long they had been there, but at least ten of the ones they had found wore service uniforms that matched the ones they saw during the attack on the capital.

"Fumu... though they were able to beat this labyrinth, it appears they didn't do it with ease. When thinking about the other routes, how many people challenged it?"

"However, considering how many people in the country that might have attempted it, there might be someone other than Freed who had managed to complete it. It might be only a matter of time before the demon country reorganizes and attacks again."

Kaori responded while showing a look of concern, possibly worrying for Liliana or the other classmates left in the capital.

"It's alright Kaori, they won't be doing it soon. The invaders were crushed, their weapon was destroyed, and the magical barrier was restored. Not to mention they don't know that Hajime's laser weapon was destroyed. They won't find it that easy to attack even if they prepare a new army."

"Shizuku... un, that's right." Kaori gave a smile after thinking about

Shizuku's prediction.

However, when they returned to Earth with Hajime, Liliana and the country would be deserted. It was only natural that it'd hurt to think about the ones left behind.

From there, Kouki entered into the conversation.

"Be relieved Kaori, even if I have to defeat mad gods, humans, or devils, I will remain and protect Liliana. After I obtain all the Age of Gods magic, it might be possible to return by myself sooner or later, so I will not desert anyone."

"Kouki..."

Indeed, it was a hero-like speech, however Kouki's glance was not given towards Kaori, but Hajime, as though he was trying to insult him. Therefore, Kaori was not relieved by his words, rather, it only made her feel more uneasy.

Before, there might have been complete conviction in his words, always only meaning well. However, now they seemed to be filled with negative emotions, including envy... doubt... impatience... irritation, ect... These various feeling were mixed in to his words even though he desperately tried to suppress them, causing his words to ring with instability.

Did Hajime take notice to this look from Kouki? Hajime merely ignored it and shrugged his shoulders. Kouki frowned over their ideals running on parallel tracks.

Shizuku's gaze wandered towards those that were giving an uneasy mood, namely Kouki, however, Hajime spoke instead.

"Oh well... it's not like we're strangers... if the princess requested it, I could probably provide her with intercontinental ballistic missiles, high speed orbital tanks, and fighters that ignore inertia and gravity...?"

"Nagumo? Isn't it too dangerous to give those to that woman? The power of balance for this world would collapse."

"Is that so? Oh well, I could put on some user restrictions so they only

work and can be operated by the royal family. At that level, nearly anything could be repulsed, even if more like Nointo came."

Shizuku's gaze wavered as Hajime gave a slightly dangerous speech while Kouki watched Hajime with dark eyes. Meanwhile, Kaori wore a somewhat happy expression.

Though Hajime was trying to avoid living a "lonely way of life", there was no reason for him to be involved in this world's problems, unless it was for Yue and the others. With the exception of perhaps Myuu and Remia, no one in this world could equal the balance of their importance in his heart.

Because Liliana is someone he knew, he'd be willing to lend his power if she requested it. Afterwards though, he had no intentions past spending the remainder of his life with Yue and the others at his home.

When considering the possibility that he'd lose the ones important to him, he felt no guilt and saw no important reason to risk his own life.

With his efforts, he had decided to give Yue and the rest's smiles his priority, and could discard anything outside of that.

Because they understood this, Yue, and the others snuggled up to Hajime. Shia and Kaori's path took them away from their family and important childhood friends.

Moreover, this extremely dangerous present for Liliana could be said to be the very limit of consideration he could offer her.

"Yaegashi (Shizuku), you and the rest also must decide what you'll do once you return from the demon country. Will you remain in this world? Will you return with us? Because I won't wait for you to decide."

"... Yes. Understood."

"Yes. It'll depend on my conversation with Eri..." Suzu said.

"I'll stick with Kouki." Ryuutaro added.

Everyone responded to Hajime's words, each of the three in their own way.

With a sensitive mood hanging in the air, Hajime advanced along the passage until they came to a 4-way intersection with a ten meter width and height.

Upon halting, Hajime confirmed the direction the compass pointed. Suddenly, Shia's rabbit ears began to twitch.

"Hajime... something is coming."

"A monster, they finally appeared? Where?"

"All four sides..."

"Even from behind?"

Though everyone readied themselves for an attack, they stiffened when they heard that monsters were approaching from the path they had taken, because it would mean that they were able to conceal themselves from Hajime's Magic Eye.

In the center of the cross roads, Hajime and the party were back to back. After an interval a voice like a groan could be heard in the darkness of the passage. (TN: Not to be a nag here, but if you just moved 10-15 meters down any direction, you'd bottleneck the baddies and turn a 4 way battle into a two way).

Vaaa...

A fairly terrifying voice not quite like a beast's groan gave off unpleasant feelings. As the darkness in the passage also seemed to have deepened, the sound of someone swallowing their saliva with a gulp was heard through the silence.

And then it appeared.

It was the figure of a person wearing a service uniform, with most of their skin having lost their coloring and a thick layer of frost over their entire body.

"These guys... they're the corpses we saw in the ice walls?" Hajime muttered as members of the demon country poured into the passage one after another.

"... Also the guy we saw earlier."

"Are they alive... no, that's not it. They're like zombies?"

While watching the frozen people that showed up down the passage way, Yue and the other faced the demons and adventurers, who groaned and held out their arms loosely lowered. As Kaori said, they looked like frozen zombies.

Frost zombies began to pour out of each of the four roads of the intersection, surrounding Hajime, Kouki, and the others.

"In any case, even if they were former people, those that stand in our way will be slaughtered."

Hajime's words acted like a signal, and the frost zombie's dull movements suddenly became fierce.

VaAAAAA!!!

An extremely unpleasant grown echoes to through the many passages in the cave. Did they say you will be eaten here? It's like they were straight from Resident Evil (Biohazard), though they weren't as gross thanks to the layer of frost preventing them from decaying, but an ugly thing is still ugly.

"Please stay away! Barrier Burst!"

To real biohazards, a somewhat panicked Suzu released the Barrier burst. It goes down the passage, and any Frost zombies who were struck by it were hurled away, but the next moment... They exploded magnificently into pieces with a roar.

They splintered apart, like pieces of meat dispersed by a bomb. It was like the scene when the Terminator in liquid nitrogen was smashed.

At almost the same time, all the other party members began to shoot out their attacks. Hajime's Schlag spouted fire, Yue and Tio sent out wind magic, Kaori's silver feathers flew, Shizuku and Kouki's blades drew deadly lines through the air, and strong impacts were released from Ryuutaro's fists.

To those attacks filled with the full destructive power colliding with the front ranks fo the frost zombies, those who didn't manage to evade shattered to the sound of crystal breaking.

"They're fairly fragile..." though Hajime mutters suspiciously, another second his eyes narrow.

"You're kidding, they're repairing themselves?"

Kaori seemed to have said this instinctively, but it was exactly that. The splinters began to gather, reforming their bodies in no time at all. The one's decomposed by Kaori's silver feathers assembled slightly differently, fathering the missing parts from nearby walls of ice.

"... Hajime, a demon stone?"

"... It isn't that. Though the magic is similar, they don't seem to have a demon stone."

"Eeh? They're like those golems from the labyrinth in the canyon?" (TN: They're talking about Milidi's labyrinth all those chapters ago)

Hajime wore a grim expression while Shia looked on with a disgusted look when she recalled the powerful and infinitely respawning enemies that repaired themselves no matter how much they destroyed them. They also didn't have a demon stone core and were destroyed only by Hajime's quick thinking.

"Just how many are there? There must be some trick."

While continuously firing, Hajime took out the compass with one hand to seek out the source of the demon core, which must be concealed in some way that his magic eye couldn't detect.

"Oo? It's nearby?"

The compass indicated a location that wasn't within the frost demon's body. The location was in the left passage, about 500 meters or so away.

Yue gave Hajime a look. "... Hajime?"

"... Apparently, the demon stone or whatever peculiar magic that moves these guys seems to be placed left from here. They must be controlled

remotely.”

Fumu... Anyway, if we don’t get to the source somehow, this fight will never end.

“Then, let’s go!”

Everyone gave off a determined air while knocking down the advancing Frost zombies. All four passaged were crowded with the zombies that had sprung up, perhaps extending as far as the eye could see?

“I’ve destroy the group ahead, everyone don’t fall behind!”
Hajime ordered while taking Orkan (the rocket launcher) out of the treasure warehouse. After hearing their response, he pointed the rocket launcher towards one corner and released an overwhelming power.

Bashuuuuu!

Orange trails flew out behind a warhead.

Boom!

With a thunderous roar that resounded through the passage, they ran past the gap Hajime had made.

With Yue and rest behind him, Hajime thanked Orkan for clearing away the frost zombies like they were nothing. Even without being able to use fire or water magic, they kept being pulverized again and again, no matter how many times they regenerated.

Thanks to Hajime’s continuous fire pulverizing the frost zombies, they had no trouble moving forward. As they passed by, those that were destroyed reformed themselves. Generally, the expressions of all the party members except Yue and Tio were cramped.

“Fueee... No a real life biohazard (resident evil)!”

“Suzu, get a hold of yourself, if you don’t look too closely it’s not that bad.”

“No, that’s bad!... Uuu... Don’t come near me! Barrier Burst!”

“Suzu, please don’t lose it! Do not waste your magical power.... Kyaaa!

That's an arm!"

"Hiiii... Kaori, watch where you're aiming. That arm that just flew by touched me!"

Though it is said it is noisy when women gather, these four were in full-blown zombie panic and it was indeed noisy. It seemed like they challenged a certain famous horror house in Japan while noisily running through the passage and talking.

"Uumu... It's good to be young. Being able to make a racket like that while facing monsters..."

While looking over her shoulder at Kaori and the others, Tio responds fairly calmly. This caused Yue to give Tio an amazed look.

"... Tio, smells like an old woman."

"That's a terrible thing to say. Well, I'm older... but isn't Yue also?"

"... I'm not. I'll be 17 forever."

"What? I'm sure you were 20 when you were imprisoned..."

While hearing something unexpected, a shiver went up Hajime's spine in response to a crisis, causing him to say something to break the tension.

"... That's right! Yue is always 17!"

"... Nn. The same as Hajime."

"To be completely dominated by Yue..."

Tio wore an amazed expression, with the noisy group of girls in the rear, while Hajime is being led by the nose by Yue. Kouki and Ryuutaro looked at each other... in spite of being chased by frost zombies, their minds seemed to be playing out an impossible scene.

After dashing for five minutes, the sound where Hajime and party running, with a Zudodo from behind, the frost zombies continued to chase with screams and roars that caused the tunnel to shake.

Hajime and the group finally arrived at a large space which seemed to be about the size of the Tokyo Dome.

Hajime rechecked the compass in his hand. The area where the demon stone that controlled the zombie horde was definitely indicated to be in this room. To be accurate, it was incased in a certain ice wall facing the entrance they had just passed through.

"I found it. Here, I see it."

Hajime could see deep into the ice wall with his Magic eye. Even the improved donner wouldn't be able to penetrate deep enough to reach it, so Hajime took out Schlagen (TN: Schlag is one of his revolvers, Schlagen is his anti-material rifle) from his treasure warehouse.

Naturally, Schlagen had also been improved thanks to sublimation magic, which greatly increased its specs. It would surely pierce the armor that had protected Miledi's golem now.

Bachibachi! Bachibachi!

Electricity intensely discharged as the anti-material rifle that specialized in penetration scatters a vivid bright red light. Hajime held Shlagen with one hand while catching it to the side. Just as he went to pull the trigger...

"... Hajime!
At the same time as Yue's warning, a large eagle that unfurled its wings from overhead began to assault the party.

It was not simply a large eagle, but it was transparent, and appeared to be bade of the same material as the ice wall, more were falling down like a downpour of ice.

Hajime momentarily fired overhead, and a flash went into the sky. At the moment of impact, it pierced the Frost eagle and the shock wave shattered it with a red ripple into two frost eagles.

The improved bullet with impact conversion was empowered with sublimation magic, increasing the power by more than three times that of Donners.

As a shimmering rain of ice came down from above, right after pulling the trigger, Hajime re-aimed the muzzle back towards the demon stone.

However...

“It moved...”

The demon stone in the wall began to move all of a sudden, moving out of the line of fire of Schlagen.

“Apparently, it’s similar to the creature we faced in the oasis, so I should think all the surrounding ice is its territory. Make note of that.”

Prompt advice came from Tio, who was dealing with a frost zombie and another frost eagle.

That advice was proven correct immediately.

“Guriaaa!”

Next from the surrounding ice wall, a large amount of two-legged wolves were created as well as frost eagles. They had large dark red eyes, were two meters all, with sharp teeth and claws, groaning with a bestial voice. Frost werewolves.

The large space was suddenly buried with large amounts of these three types of demons, and like those before, as soon as they were smashed, they reformed.

A frost zombie from the rear let out a large groaning voice at the party, overflowing with something.

From the surrounding walls, ridiculous amounts of frost werewolves appeared to encircle the party.

In addition,

Bikibiki. Baki!

With suck sound effects, the demon stone in the ice wall let out an amazing amount of power, increasing every second.

And,

“Kuwaaa!”

A roar, followed by a large shock wave.

“Absolute Field.”

At once, Yue created a barrier by distorted space which warded off the effects of the earthquake.

Opposite of that barrier, the creature that held the demon stone finally showed itself. It was like the turtle-like demonic beings who had attacked the capital before, but its body was mostly composed of ice and the shell had icicles like a pin cushion over twenty meters in length.

“Apparently, the trial is to pierce the demon stone in that guy while dealing with all of these demons?”

Hajime took a guess while smiling scornfully – a normal party in such a cold place after wondering for so long would probably despair having to fight like this. Unfortunately for these monsters, they weren’t a normal party, and thanks to Hajime’s artifacts the temperature wasn’t a problem either.

The cold and the pressure that the frost turtle gave off caused Kouki and his party to pale, but Hajime only glared at it with scornful eyes.

At the same time, Hajime let loose his immense killing intent and pressure. A wave of red magic hit the surrounding monsters and immediately broken them to pieces. Somehow, even the frost turtle flinched at that.

Hajime took a single step forward.

The frost turtle let out a roar as if to deny that it flinched from a mere human, and all the surrounding demons began to move together.

The Ice and snow cave... the first trial started here. (Tn: First trial! I thought we were nearly done! :O)

Chapter 138 : Frost Turtle

As always, this is a not a direct translation, but a rewrite on my interpretation of the MTLs. All credit goes to the original author Chuuni Suki

*

“Well, first of all... Amanokawa, charge forward!”

“Eh?”

While Hajime and the Frost Turtle let out enormous waves of pressure towards each other from their killing intent, Kouki had thought they would start fighting. Instead, he was called forward, and thus gave Hajime a startled response.

“No ‘eh’, charge forward and quickly crush that turtle.”

“W-why me?” Kouki asked instinctively.

Hajime turned around and gave him an amazed look while continuing to shoot down the surrounding monsters one shot at a time.

“Ah, you guys came here to do what? It’s not likely to count if we just do it all for you...”

“... A that’s right!”

“Amanokawa, use all of your power to crush the big guy. The other three of you (Suzu, Ryuutaro, Shizuku), support him while the rest of us keep the small fries off of you. Do it quickly. If you wuss out, I’ll finish the job.” Hajime smiled provocatively.

Kouki gave a strong nod, flames of determination sprouting in his eyes.

“Leave it to me. I’ll show you I can absolutely knock it down. Shizuku... Suzu, Ryuutaro, Let’s go!”

“Oo, Let’s go!”

“I’ll cover you. Take care of the icicles behind me. There may be some trick to them.”

“Leave the defense to me. I’ll show you I can protect everyone!”

After everyone answered energetically, a silver flash struck the monsters near the Frost Turtle, disintegrating them in an instant.

“Go! Don’t do anything rash!”

Thanks to Kaori’s silver bombardment of disintegration, an easy route had been opened up between Kouki’s party and the Frost Turtle. They ran forward while thanking her.

While its red eyes shone, the gap they formed immediately began to fill with demons once again.

“What are you doing? Your opponent is me! Trembling Heaven Triagram!”

As the turtle was focused on Hajime, Kouki’s party ran towards the Frost Turtle while Kouki shouted out his favored technique.

A killer attack of light flew forward, directly striking the eerily shining eyes of the Frost Turtle and tearing them up. A shock wave followed, hallowing that wound.

“KuWaAAn!”

With part of its head crushed, and only one eye remaining, the Frost Turtle raised a roar while shooting killing intent at Kouki’s party. This was all going according to Kouki’s plan.

And with its mouth gaping open, a breath of ice and snow was expelled out!

Spiraling like a tornado filled with ice chips, any who were caught in it would freeze immediately. Even if you could endure the cold, the ice would cut you to ribbons.

However, they had a master of magical barriers they could rely on.

“Faster than the wind, quicker than the water, Over Saint Scatter!”

By reinforcing the magic’s image with chanting, Suzu created a Barrier that dispersed energy. The bombardment of ice and snow collided with

the barrier, making a “gou!” sound. And even though it came with a terrific impact, the energy was dispersed and could not overcome the barrier.

“It will keep regening indefinitely as long as it contains the demon stone. Don’t waste time. It is necessary to end this in one blow.”

“My Heaven’s Might takes thirty seconds to reach maximum power.”

“Then, in the meantime, it’s fine if Kouki doesn’t need to do anything.”

While Suzu prevented the attack with her barrier, Shizuku explained while giving Kouki a look. Considerable thermal power would be required to destroy the demon stone and crush the gigantic figure of the Frost Turtle. Kouki would be the most suitable.

Kouki understood this, given the time it’d take to execute his attack. Before, it took over a minute or more to reach maximum power. The time had been shortened considerably and amplified by several times, thanks to the revision of the Holy Sword.

“Everyone, the attack is weakening!”

“Good. When the attack stops, spread out… Suzu, stay with me.”

“Understood! You can count on me!”

At almost the same moment as Suzu’s words, the attack came to an end. The ice and snow fell down and Shizuku and the rest spread out as Kouki ordered.

Shizuku dashed out low to the ground, slipping under the Frost Turtle.

“The first attack, Flashing Blossom!”

With a sharp aura drawing black tracks in the air, her target was the Frost Turtle’s legs. To the large transparent foot, a gap of space formed diagonally, cutting the foot in two, which slid roughly and dropped to the floor.

“Flashing Blossom! Flashing Blossom!”

Without a pause, Shizuku kept advancing while sliding around, severing

the second foot on one side. It slipped out, leaving the remainder in the rear side.

"KuruaaA!?"

Cheers! Feeling pleased, the sword returned to its scabbard. The two feet slipped down diagonally and with a scream the Frost Turtle went down.

"Zzuzuuzun!"

The Frost Turtle that had lost its balance made the Earth tremble. Immediately, a strong thirst for blood was shot behind the Frost Turtle stretching across its long neck.

"Tsu!?"

With her skin raising like goose flesh, Shizuku's intuition convinced her to dash from the place she was standing. A large number of icicles pushed out from the ground where she had been.

Like frozen flowers blooming from the Earth, sharp icicles bloomed in a trail following Shizuku.

"Aerodynamic!"

While being chased by quickly forming icicles, Shizuku barely made it into the air before flowering icicles swallowed her path.

However, at that time, three frost eagles with exquisite timing attacked her from three different directions, respectively.

"…. flash…"

While attempting to shoot out a Flashing Blossom, she didn't seem to be able to make it in time. There was no way she could avoid the terrible claws from at least two of the frost eagles.

At that moment, Shizuku prepared to take damage—

Three red flashes passed by her surroundings.

With unflinching aim, those flashes shot through the center of the chest of each of the frost eagles, causing them to burst into shimmering

pieces.

In recognition of the attack, Shizuku's eyes flickered to the origin... where Hajime was enclosed by a considerable amount of demonic beasts. He was using a combination of cross bits and Metsurai (TN: Gatling Gun). However, what caught her eye was the muzzle of Donner.

"From there, precision fire without even seeing."

Even with a distance of twenty meters or more, and with the power of the bullets and the penetration for the bullets having increased by three times, the shock wave from the explosive bullets couldn't reach her with so many demons between them.

So, how did the precision fire reach Shizuku?

The answer was easy: You only had to shot through them.

That is to say that Hajime shot through the openings between the frost eagles and other monsters -between their groins, under their wings... Shooting with precision like firing through the eye of a needle. Without visually checking, he executed a perfectly cheat-like ability that could be called a miracle.

While forgetting the battle surrounding her, Shizuku was charmed by the power that Hajime wielded. It wasn't until her childhood friend shouted that her consciousness came back into focus.

"Don't get carried away! Heavy Crash!!"

While attempting to wake up Shizuku, who used aerodynamic, Ryuutaro ran through the air and flew down from above, striking the Frost Turtle towards the head using a fist wrapped in a gauntlet artifact with the strength of a meteorite.

With a roaring sound, the Frost Turtle's head crushed with a shock wave. Thanks to the gravity magic on his gauntlet, an icicle attack following Shizuku was interrupted. Ryuutaro gave a premature grin after seeing the results of his attack.

Immediately after the head was crushed, a new head appeared from the

root.

“Geh!? Shi—“

To the dark red eyes glinting from inside the shell, Ryuutaro let out an expletive instinctively. The next moment, it let out a breath attack of ice and snow, and Ryuutaro attempted to execute Vajra while crossing both of his arms at once.

However, a hexagonal barrier immediately came into existence, parting the attack. Bikibiki sounds denoted the cracks forming thanks to the powerful attack. A second later, the same barrier formed again, doubling, and then doubling again.

“Suzu’s Heavenly Barrier?”

While Ryuutaro exclaimed in surprise, he turned his gaze to the small magical barrier master who was chanting ahead near Kouki.

Suzu returned a smile at Ryuutaro’s look.

Ryuutaro’s guess was half right.

“Expulsion Space.”

Expulsion space was a defense magic made when compounding magic of two or more barriers. Heavenly barrier was joined with expulsion. Originally, Suzu didn’t have the ability to compound magic, however, thanks to her iron-ribbed fan artifact, the function that allowed magic compounding was obtained.

To Ryuutaro, who was stuck in the barrier under attack from the breath attack, Suzu cast Expulsion Space in a panic. Particularly after seeing a frost eagle attempting to assault him from behind. However, it was unnecessary. Immediately before reaching him, a powerful thunder dragon appeared and consumed it.

“UoOO!? That surprised me!”

While shooting sparks, the great magic dragon passed Ryuutaro who had a drooping expression while uttering such a complaint.

Yue, while directing the seven-headed serpent with slender fingers

which danced like batons, turned a quick glance at Ryuutaro, causing his jaws to drop.

With an expression of impossible confidence, she put out a gesture that scolded him which seemed to say that he shouldn't react to every little thing, and should instead concentrate on his target. Even the thick-headed Ryuutaro seemed to get what she was trying to express.

"Really, every last one of Nagumo's women are amazing. I can't imagine how he managed to make them all fall in love with him."

Ryuutaro had a wry smile, struggling to imagine how the Hajime he knew from back in Japan managed to do it. While executing Vajra, he began to charge, motivated by the fact that Yue was watching him.

As a matter of fact, he fell in love with her at first sight, and was disappointed in love immediately thereafter, thanks to the pink space generated between her and Hajime. He couldn't even tell his best friend Kouki.

After being showed that sweet space many times between the two, he was able to arrange his feelings. Still, if Yue glanced at him, he couldn't say he didn't become happy for a moment.

"Well, mostly..."

While ridiculing himself again, he crushed the head of the frost turtle, while Shizuku again chopped the feet that regenerated on the lowered side.

Naturally though, it was incapacitated, its temporary stop in movement would be over soon, and after just thirty seconds.

It is, in a word...

"Shizuku! Ryuutaro. Fall back. I will go... you monster... Heaven's Might!"

That's right, the time necessary to execute Kouki's Heaven's Might was reached, the enormous light like a fixed star spiraling from his holy sword proved as such.

Kouki lept forward using a disc created with Aerodynamic, swinging to pierce the frost turtle whose eyes were bugged out.

DoOOOO!!

The aura undulated, and it almost seemed like the sun rose in the hall, such a huge quantity of pure-white light dyed the surroundings.

The Frost Turtle, to that bombardment of light falling towards it, transformed its shell into a cone, in an attempt to distribute the power of the attack. A five meter diameter light impacted the back of the Frost Turtle.

"Kuwaaaan!!!"

A terrific impact sounded and reverberated in the entire area. The screaming of the Frost Turtle resounded with frustration. Its shell, even with its transformation which according to its plan, would distribute the power of the attack – Heaven's Might was indeed distributed.

However, while under normal circumstances this attack was powerful – thanks to Hajime's remodelling, it was now even stronger. Kouki's last resort melted the conic tip, and the armor of ice surrounding the shell disappeared magnificently while white smoke rose.

"Please disappear as it is! Let this power be enough!!"

The Frost Turtle's eyes began to brighten as it absorbed the surrounding ice to regenerate. Kouki let out a shout with a desperate look. If his authentic maximum attack that spent all of his magical might was endured completely, it'd be proof that he still hadn't reached the level of attack needed for a Great Dungeon monster.

Since meeting Hajime again, the unpleasantness and painful feelings overflowed. He wanted to do it by means of his own power, by all means.

"... Kouki..."

Nearby Suzu said, with a slightly frightened expression after seeing Kouki's look.

"OoOOO!!!"

“KuWaAAA!”

The screaming of Kouki and the Frost Turtle collided.

In a moment.

Crack.

After hearing such a sound, innumerable fissure appeared around the Frost Turtle, and ice chips scattered with a pitter pater to the ground.

And,

DoPaAAaA!

The light of the Heaven’s Might crushed that gigantic figure from the back, eliminating the surrounding ground so that there was no free time to allow regeneration. Light swallowed up the front and back of the Frost Turtle.

The scene was like a sea liner breaking in half while sinking.

“KuaaA.”

With a sighing rattle, the dark red light went out from the Frost Turtle’s eyes.

And after a beat the light that swallowed the Frost Turtle gradually reduced, returning the space to normal.

“Woot! Haha… defeated, by me…”

While intensely panting, Kouki tottered. Aerodynamic lost its power, and his body fell, only supported by the nearby Suzu.

“Kouki, are you o…”

Suzu, while supporting him, starting to ask anxiously at that time –

Boba!

While making such a noise, a frost eagle swooped up from the crater where the remains of the Frost Turtle were scattered, while gripping something with both of its talons.

“Why, how come it’s still moving?”

“Kouki… Look at that.”

Kouki looked with tired eyes in astonishment after seeing the area Suzu indicated with a strained voice where she pointed. A dark red crystal was gripped in the talons of the frost eagle…

“Da-damn it! It wasn’t destroyed? However, you’re not getting away.”

While grinding his teeth, Kouki who had used up all of his power while thinking he had destroyed the demon stone with his Heaven’s Might snapped.

The moment the Frost Turtle had judged it wouldn’t be able to win against his attack, it seemed to have returned to its origin within the demon stone and created a frost eagle to bear it away.

Kouki again rose his holy sword with an unsteady hand. Because the mana absorption effect was added to Kouki’s armor by Hajime, he didn’t feel the effect of mana exhaustion.

With no time to delay thanks to the frost eagle with the demon stone that started to make sounds of transformation, Kouki started to press the attack. Not heading for Suzu, he ignored his mana exhaustion like he was possessed.

Even if he had a strong will, the light that gathered in the holy sword was weak. Looking at it, Kouki started to chant the spell for Limit Break.

“With Limit Break…”

“Kouki… listen to me!”

Suzu yelled angrily. Though it’s possible to regain his strength after using Limit Break – the after effects would be great, and it wouldn’t be easy to recover even with recovery magic – and while it would most likely be able to recover completely with regeneration magic, it would use a considerable amount of Hajime’s party magic.

Even though he was pushing ahead alone, Kouki was surrounded by allies… and there was no need to overwork himself.

“The importance of flash claw, break!”

With her sword drawing skill, Shizuku raced through the air while firing a blade of wind that cut the demon stone and the frost eagle that was transmogrifying into pieces.

A dark blue light expanded, along with a shock wave that came from the demon stone in front of Shizuku. She faced it, blocking with her sheath.

The ability of impact conversion was granted to the black sword's sheath.

The impact was transmitted directly to the demon stone, a fissure began to form with a "bikibiki" sound, and finally...

"Ha!"

Goba!

It was crushed completely, detailed splinters of dark red sparkling crystal fell to the Earth.

At the same time, the large amounts of monsters filling the hall all collapsed together with a rattle, becoming nothing more than lumps of ice.

"....."

"....."

Kouki looked at the scene dumbfounded. Though Suzu supported his shoulder, he was staring around uneasily and didn't seem to notice.

A splendid, cheerful voice rang out.

"Hahaha. We've done it..! Kouki! We won!"

"Eh? Ryuutaro...?"

"Yeah... how to say it... look at that spiraled shell. Heaven's Might look at that crater. As expected of Kouki."

Thanks to the expression of his best friend who was hitting his shoulder, Kouki's obsessed expression returned to his normal one. However, Suzu who was supporting Kouki was still panicked.

“That’s right. I, No... we won. To the Great Labyrinth monster.”

“Yeah, it’s refreshing. After pushing on since before...”

“Haha, certainly, for a moment it is a little refreshing.”

“Right? The day when we can catch up to Nagumo seems to come a bit closer.”

“... Its good if that’s the case.”

While expressing gratitude to Suzu, whose shoulder he borrowed, Kouki stood tall by himself with a wry smile. Thanks to the brightness of Ryuutaro, his dark mood cleared up a little. However, a deep regret remained that he was not able to do it with his own power.

“Shizuku...”

“? Thanks for the hard work, Kouki.”

Shizuku returned by jumping down to Kouki’s position. Kouki smoothed over his sharp glance while panicking. Though Shizuku felt somewhat uneasy after looking at Kouki’s appearance, she gave thanks for the hard work after their long awaited victory.

“Is that right? Apart from that, Kouki’s Heaven’s Might, your strongest attack, since strengthening the holy sword, was more than I imagined.”

“That’s right! That’s right! An amazing blow.”

“Ma... something like that is...”

While Shizuku modestly praised the Heaven’s Might that caused the crater before her eyes, making light of her own achievements, Suzu tried to dispel the desperate feeling in the air with clichéd praise.

As might be expected, Kouki felt embarrassed: being praised by two girls in parting, while smiling and scratching his cheek.

A voice comes from behind Kouki’s party.

“Oo~i, though it’s good to enjoy your victory, it would be good to leave soon!”

While looking at Hajime, who was standing on a mountain of ice

showing a cool appearance without an indication he had taken on a thousand opponents, he tapped his shoulder with Donner while indicating a direction.

An advancing passage seemed to have appeared in the wall where the Frost Turtle had come from.

While Kouki's party nodded to each other, they headed over to Hajime, who released Aerodynamic.

"Grats. You seem to be able to fight without any trouble against the Great Labyrinth monster."

For Hajime that expressed rare words of praise, a look that seemed like it was observing a rare animal was turned towards Kouki. Do biting words come from such a glance? Shizuku answered with a panic towards Hajime who gave such a look.

"Yes... thank you. Thanks for the power of these artifacts."

"Well... you seemed to have mastered them well. Although, I wasn't worried since we're fighting as a group, anyway."

"Yeah? While you might think it was trivial, the precision firing I saw Nagumo use sent shivers up my back."

"... When death approaches – a person can do the unexpected."

To the faraway look in Hajime's eyes while recalling the past.... Shizuku expressed a smile while thinking about his reliability.

"As far as that goes... Nagumo. Did we pass?"

Irritated, Kouki diverted the conversation between Hajime and Shizuku.

"N? Ah, to say were your efforts accepted?"

"That's right."

"It should be alright, given the concept of this Great Labyrinth."

"In what way..."

Kouki inclined his neck to the previous comment. Hajime turned his eyes to Tio, seeking her confirmation. Tio, who opened her mouth,

expressed her full approval.

"With infinity reproducing monsters, with the ability to freeze you to death, and a master-class monster built like a fortress, it was certainly troublesome. However, if you fight only a strong monster, isn't that the same as Orcus? The concept isn't clear for the Ice and Snow Cave."

"Though all of us knocked down at least three digits worth of monsters."

"Because there were over a thousand monsters to overwhelm us, I don't think we failed."

"... Nn, without question."

Hajime's group said one after another, calm and composed as those who had the most experience in great labyrinth clearing compared to Kouki's party.

While thinking such differences were being shown off, the dark and unpleasant feelings once again swirled in Kouki's heart while he showed a consenting face.

Shizuku, who was worried about Kouki's appearance, left it for later, since Hajime was urging them forward.

And again... they went forward into the passage enclosed with large ice walls.

After walking for thirty minutes, as the last light was seen at the tip of the passage... the extended maze was vast, like a joke.

Chapter 139 : Labyrinth

*

Spreading out below them was a vast maze.

It was vast maze inside a great labyrinth. That was the scene they were now looking at from the exit of the passage.

The walls overhead formed a vault. The maze could easily be confused with an athletic park if not for its sheer size. Based only on what they could see, the maze was at least 1 kilometer deep. They couldn't see anything farther because of the snowfall, but since the width of the maze seemed to be at least 10 kilometers, it could be guessed that the depth wouldn't be any less.

From the exit of the passage where they were currently standing, there were stairs leading down to the maze. At the end of the stairs stood an arch-shaped entrance to the maze. It seemed that after entering the maze, getting to the exit would be the second trial of the great labyrinth.

"What, do we have to pass through such an insanely huge maze? How annoying!"

"Ryuutaro, it can't be helped. This is part of the trials."

"But still!"

Ryuutaro hated trivialness. While looking at the maze below, his expression distorted into one of complete irritation. Kouki, while forcing a smile, was trying to calm him down, only to receive a dissatisfied look in return.

Then at that time, Ryuutaro suddenly grinned. It seemed he had thought of something.

"Oi. I just thought of something good. Now that we're in an open space, let's just fly over it!"

Without a word, but a with a face which seemed to say "I've got it!", Ryuutaro used "Aerodynamic" and jumped into the air.

“Ba, Baka! Come back!”

“Ryu, Ryuutaro-kun!”

Shizuku and Suzu impatiently tried to restrain Ryuutaro whose imprudence knew no bounds.

Kouki also promptly reached out to stop him but it was already too late.

It looked like Ryuutaro got a little excited at the seemingly easy way out of the trial. The muscle-headed Ryuutaro who always rushed in seemed even more careless than usual this time. Being always positive and active could be considered one of Ryuutaro’s strong points, but since he often went too far, it was more of weak point in the end. And this kind of weakness is fatal in a great labyrinth.

Hajime crossed his arms as he stared observingly at Ryuutaro’s recklessness, who finally reached the overhead boundary line of the great labyrinth.

At that moment,

Voonn!!

“Nuwaa!?”

A sound that seemed to bend the air itself resounded, the air surrounding Ryuutaro virtually shook. Immediately after, Ryuutaro’s shape disappeared.

“Ryuutaro!?”

“Ah mou! This fool!”

“Fuue!? What do we do! Nagumo-kun, Ryuutaro-kun has disappeared!”

Kouki and his party frantically asked. With a face on the verge of tears, Suzu desperately asked for Hajime’s help.

As for Hajime, he was concentrating on the information provided by his demon eye stone and didn’t look like he was paying any attention to Suzu’s plea for help. She had been completely ignored.

The moment the air bent, Hajime’s demon eye stone sensed the action

of a magical power. At the same time, Hajime picked up a magical response from the corner of his field of vision and had shifted his gaze toward its direction. At the end of his line of sight, before they knew it, a hexagonal prism of ice was hanging from the ceiling. At that very location, a similar phenomenon of air distortion had occurred during which the ice prism sprouted from the ceiling, revealing the figure of Ryuutaro inside the prism.

"He's right there."

"Ehh?"

"What?"

"Where!"

They all reacted to Hajime's answer and followed his gaze. Then they became speechless. That was because they saw their childhood friend, who had disappeared, in the ice prism, looking like a specimen would in an exhibition.

On the other hand, despite being inside the block of ice, Ryuutaro's expression had turned frantic, as though he had still retained his consciousness.

However, thinking things had suddenly taken a turn for the worse would be an overstatement. Indeed, Ryuutaro was not inside stone, but ice. It looked like he had activated "Vajra" and was trying his best to free himself. However, he seemed unable to move, and he was in pain with every breath he took.

Moreover, as if to make sure the trespasser was properly dealt with, countless icicles with sharp edges had grown from the surrounding ceiling.

"This, This is bad..."

"This pattern, it's unmistakably..."

"Awawa, I have to deploy a barrier right now."

Naturally, they were instantly able to guess who the icicles which had

appeared were pointing at, and their faces turned pale.

A panicked Suzu was trying to deploy a barrier to protect him, but since the ceiling was 500 meters above their heads, it was hard to deploy it at the right coordinates immediately. This is why deploying a barrier on her current position and launching it towards Ryuutaro might be the best way to go about it. However, would it make it in time?

"U~n, even with a barrier it seems he would die from suffocation sooner or later... Why would there be a need for drilling icicles to begin with?"

"Can't you lend a hand without analyzing things so calmly!?"

Shizuku retorted with a face on the verge of tears while Hajime simply tilted his neck in response.

Hajime was thinking that the icicles were some kind of guarantee in case Ryuutaro somehow managed to escape, and that they wouldn't attack immediately if left alone. He planned to share his conjecture with the others, but it seemed Shizuku and the others were feeling really uneasy about their comrade's predicament.

Hajime shrugged his shoulders in response to Shizuku and turned his gaze toward Yue and Kaori. They both gave a small nod, showing they had understood Hajime's intentions. Rather, taking into account the speed with which the spell was cast, it looked like Yue had guessed Hajime's request before he could even shift his gaze to her.

"Field Pierce."

"Mou, it can't be helped, because Ryuutaro-kun's bad habit never changes no matter how much time passes..."

The space before Kaori's eyes opened and a transfer gate appeared. The opposite gate's light shone from the side of the ice prism which entrapped Ryuutaro.

With a wry smile, Kaori deployed her silver wings and fired a large number of silver feathers through the gate.

After crossing the gate and fluttering around Ryuutaro's surroundings,

the silver feathers clung to the ice prism and started decomposing it effortlessly.

Seeing the prey escaping, as if making a judgment of their own, the countless icicles which had sprouted from the surrounding ceiling finally started shooting towards Ryuutaro.

Nevertheless, the prism which was covered with feathers like a cocoon was in itself a protective wall due to the decomposition effect of the feathers. Consequently, the group of icicles which was fired from the ceiling like the projectiles of a Gatling gun turned into mist as it met the silver feathers, leaving not even the trace of a single ice shard, and was carried away with the wind.

"Kaori, while you're at it, you carry out his punishment. Decompose this fool's groin."

While Kouki and the others were breathing a sigh of relief after seeing Ryuutaro saved by the silver feathers of a Kaori whose body was suited for both offense and defense, Hajime spat out these merciless words. Kouki's mouth was flapping open and closed with a face saying "what a scary punishment!"

"Gr, Groin... There's no way I can do such a thing! Ha, Hajime-kun, no ecchi!"

To a Kaori who had been thrown into panic due to her misinterpretation of Hajime's words, Yue added more fuel to the fire with a cold look.

"... What exactly is ecchi in decomposing a fool's groin? Kaori, you react too much to the word 'Groin', you pervert." (En: *Delete's his groin decomposition sadism fanfic.*)

"N, No! Yue! To do that I have to touch his groin with my silver feathers right? Isn't that the same thing as indirectly telling me to touch Ryuutaro-kun's groin! That's ecchi!"

"No matter what you say, that doesn't change the fact that you overreacted to the word 'Groin' and your face turned red. You pervert."

"Yue just wants to make me look like a pervert right!? I, I am not

someone who has any interest in things like groins!”

“Ho... Does that statement also apply to Hajime’s groin?”

“!? Th, That’s, how to say it..., I just, I just a little, Umm...”

“... Nn. As I thought, you pervert. You groin master.”

“How mean! No matter how you look at it that title is just too cruel! Hajime-kun, I truly don’t have any excessive interest in groins! I swear!”

“Aa~ Nn. I got it. It’s my fault for starting this conversation to begin with. Now, you two, stop repeatedly talking about groins. Look, Amanogawa doesn’t look like he can take it any longer. Taniguchi looks about to breathe fire. Yaegashi looks like a mother seeing off her grown-up daughter.”

Being told so by an amazed Hajime, Kaori turned towards Kouki and the others. Indeed, they seemed to be exactly in the state Hajime described.

Kouki, with a face saying “Where did that pure and innocent Kaori I know go?”, had turned his head away to escape from reality and his gaze was wandering in circles. Suzu, while making a red face, was muttering “Adult, Adult ...”.

And then Shizuku, while looking a little lonely somewhere inside, was looking at Kaori with an affectionate face, like the face of a mother rejoicing at the growth of her daughter.

Kaori shivered. At this rate, she was going to be thought of as a pervert excessively interested in groins by her childhood friends.

She panicked and took a step forward to explain herself. At that moment,

“Kyaaaaaaaaaaa!! It hurrrrrts!!”

A shriek came from above. It was Ryuutaro’s voice. Startled, they all looked above. There was no longer the sweeping fire of icicles. Instead, all they caught sight of was the shining silver cocoon. Then they could guess why Ryuutaro was screaming. Ryuutaro vigorously gave Kaori a look implying “Idiot”.

“Ehh? Ah! Ryu, Ryutaro-kun, I’m sorry!!”

Kaori hurriedly undid the cocoon of silver feathers.

Inside, Ryuurato’s worn-out face appeared, his eyes rolling back in his head.

The prism had been decomposed a while ago. Kaori who was busy trying to come up with a justification had completely forgotten to cancel the spell. As a result, Ryuutaro who was inside had started decomposing as well.

Ryuutaro, devoid of any power, started free falling to the ground. Suzu created a light web to receive him and then brought him to their current location.

No one wanted to look at Ryuutaro whose clothes had been tattered. When Ryuutaro’s nude muscular half was exposed, everyone averted their eyes in a different direction.

Hajime sent a gaze to Kouki and the others who had averted their eyes implying “Amenogawa, you guys are supposed to be close friends right……” but Kouki kept his gaze away from Ryuutaro and started surveying the surroundings unnaturally as if looking out for any sign of danger.

Ryuutaro’s nether region seemed safe, but its surrounding clothes were gone. Close friends or not, it couldn’t be helped that they had all averted their eyes.

His eyes were rolled back in his head and he was in a tattered state. This day would be known as the day the 17-year-old’s groin was exposed publicly. This day would undoubtedly remain a part of Ryuutaro’s dark past forever.

With all her strength, Kaori closed her eyes while keeping her gaze away, using reproduction magic to lend the forsaken Ryuutaro a hand.

“….. Kaori, you’re a cruel person. Ripping his clothes at that place.”

“That was the result of your being mean and distracting me earlier!”

"..... Nn. Shifting the responsibility to someone else is bad. Now take responsibility and heal him without looking away."

"No, No way! There's nothing to see! I don't want to see anything besides Hajime's!"

"As a master healer, you can't do things that way. Now, look properly. And burn it into your memory, the groin of another person than Hajime, that is."

"Nooo! Stop it! Stop pushing me! Don't force me into a sexual relationship I don't want!"

While Kaori was forcefully helping Ryuutaro, Yue used just the right amount of wind magic to try to open Kaori's eyes. Pinpointing the exact location of her eyes, in addition to possessing a good amount of power, and on top of that, being harmless to Kaori. This was truly a feat only possible for Yue who deserved nothing less than the title of genius.

"Yue-san and Kaori-san, somehow, they seem to get along well."

"Well, I get the feeling Yue likes teasing Kaori but.... yeah they seem rather playful don't they?"

"Isn't this more or less a form of friendship? Always quarrelling and so on....."

(TN: For better or worse, this is where Tingle's translation ends, and my/Southbounds begins)

Hajime smiled at the sight of the childish fight between Yue and Kaori. It was different from the relationship Yue and Shia shared. Hajime was extremely pleased that Yue exhibited such a happy mood.

When they play, rather than acting the part of an older sister as she would with Shia, she talked to Kaori more like a friend. The gap in childish behavior from Yue caused Hajime to hold back more than usual, and if asked, he would say things were fine because of Yue.

Ryuutaro's darkest moment was turned into a punishment game for his childhood friend by none other than the woman he fell in love with at

first sight...

"... It's become enough punishment."

"It is terrible..."

"Ryuutaro... I'm sorry, I am powerless."

To the nearly unconscious Ryuutaro, Kouki gave a sympathetic expression... even thought he was still averting his gaze.

Five minutes later, after he had regained his consciousness and clothing, Ryuutaro gave an apology for acting rashly, which received lukewarm glances.

While Ryuutaro was trying to figure out what happened, Kouki tried to subtly deceive him with some polite fiction. However, because Hajime smirked and laughed at him, he had dark clouds hanging from his back, unlike his usual cheerful self.

Kouki desperately tried to calm Ryuutaro down while glancing back at Hajime and the rest as they started descending the staircase.

"Yue, just to be sure, is there any way we can fly over and skip this maze?"

"... Difficult, because I am not skilled enough yet, the mana consumption would be too high to continue with."

"Oh well, figure as much. Looks like we need to take the maze head on."

Hajime pulled out Shlagen (Tn: again, his rifle), and aimed it at the edge of ice wall. After hearing the shot, everyone looked at the wall in surprise.

The ice wall wasn't too thick to be broken with Schlagen or Orkan.

However, as Hajime had expected, after the red spark pierced the wall, the surrounding ice around the hole restored it in no time. The restoration speed was even faster than the monsters from before.

"... Looks like it's impossible to just break down the wall to quickly reach the goal after all." Hajime muttered.

While watching for any counter attacks from the maze, he took out his

compass with one hand. While the others looked at him in amazement, especially after what just happened to Ryuutaro, he ignored them.

"Next, let's see if this guy works properly in the maze..."

Although everyone tensed when Hajime walked through the archway entrance to the maze... Hajime just watched the compass in his hand without any particular worry.

Right at the entrance was a reversed T-Junction that led to the right and left. The compass needle shown slightly, pointing them to the right passage.

"Fumu, looks like it doesn't have any problem in the maze?"

"Ah. The maze won't be a maze, thanks to this."

Hajime smiled wryly at Tio's affirmation as she followed him and passed through the arch. He was thinking he wished he had it during the Raisen Great Labyrinth.

"Uu, Meredi would have been no problem with this."

"... Nn. Maybe that's why they entrusted it to Haltina."

While Shia responded with a sulk and ducked through the entrance, Yue and she reached the same conclusion as Hajime, that the compass was likely left in the Sea of Trees for that very reason.

Hajime patted each of them on the shoulder lightly, offering comfort. The three of them looked at each other with bitter smiles.

With an expression of disappointment at not being able to share those memories, Kaori and Tio shared a glance. After a background glance, the group moved onward.

With a width and length of ten kilometers, how long would such a maze take to clear normally? You would have to search in the cold that made you want to cry. It'd take incredible willpower.

"There's... quite a sense of oppression."

"Yeah. Because everyone's appearance reflects from the walls, like a

mirror house.”

Suzu was looking uneasily at the ten meter high Shizuku who was reflected on the icy walls.

“Because they came out of the walls earlier... is that the idea?”

“Likely. It’s a huge maze where you wonder around aimlessly. If or when a monster appears might be quite deadly.”

“... Nn, but there’s no problem.”

“That’s right, because we have Hajime’s Magic Eye and its perception abilities. Also, my rabbit ears won’t miss the sound of a surprise attack either.”

Shia was especially bright and confident. It was emphasized loudly when she struck the melons on her chest with a “ton” noise. Shizuku and Suzu’s morale took a hit, however Kouki and Ryuutaro were boosted after a quick glance as proof.

Of course, Hajime was giving them a glare. After becoming aware and admitting his feelings for Shia, he reacted to such gestures towards Shia.

“... Hajime?”

“Cough Ummm... The next turn is left, right?”

Giving a gentle look, Kaori tried to change the subject with a cough. Hajime looked at the compass awkwardly.

After seeing Hajime’s reaction, Shia covered her chest with her arms while her cheeks blushed her body wiggled.

“Really Hajime, what are you saying? You want to play with my chest again? Please pardon me that teasing smile... Well, that’s not to say it wasn’t amazing, and I’d love to do it again. But right now is no good! If you do it now, I will faint again and we won’t be able to finish the walk through-”

To Shia’s confession, everyone turned their face to Hajime with an expression that said “what on earth did you do.” mixed with shivering, shame, and envy. Hajime pretended not to notice and used his right to

remain silent.

"... Hajime... What was done to Shia during her first time?... Hajime wild beast?"

"If I'm a wild beast, Yue is a beast trainer. Although I endure and counterattack."

While listening to Yue and Hajime's conversation and thinking "it's THAT, isn't it?", it could be said their experience was piling up, and the stairs to adulthood was climbed considerably.

Everyone was behaving suspiciously, at a loss on whether they should be listening to this conversation or not, when Hajime suddenly halted.

And, slipping out Donner high speed without looking back, he shot.

Dopan!!

The released bullet pass overhead of the blushing and panicking Suzu and crushed the arm with claws that was growing soundlessly from the wall.

"...!?"

Thanks to her small height, only a few hairs were lost. She lost her voice as the red flash passed by, experiencing the full power that was released from it.

"Coming, right and left wall."

Hajim reported a warning while ignoring the strangled noises coming from Suzu. His appearance was someone already switched completely to battle mode.

From the surrounding walls, fingers with claws, bones, and sinew, an ice statue like an armored Bullet beetle appeared.

"GuoOOO!" X5

From the right and left, Frost ogres attacked. Kouki intercepted the right side while Hajime took the left.

Shizuku and Kouki's killer attacks cut a Frost Ogre in two. Ryuutaro's

fist attack crushed one at the chest, and the two remaining are forced at bay by Suzu's magical barrier.

This time, the demon stone that produced them infinitely did not appear in another place. A dark red crystal appeared inside the cut and the crushed chests. Kouki shot a blow at it.

The remainder were held in place by Suzu and Shizuku damaging them.

Meanwhile, Kouki and Ryuutaro delivered the finishing blows on the Frost ogres that they were dealing with. It was a one sided fight.

Forgetting caution, Kouki and Ryuutaro smiled at each other, and then they heard the shout of a lovely voice...

"UryaaA!"

Kouki, who turned around with a sudden look, saw the beautiful legs of Shia in an upward kick as she knocked five Frost ogres above them.

Though they struggled desperately, the Frost ogres didn't have the ability to fly, and crashed to the ground naturally thanks to gravity.

Shia, as she came back down, rotated elegantly and swung Doryuken with centrifugal force, hitting the frost ogre who had fallen down with perfect timing to be blown into a wall and shattered into pieces like a bomb exploding.

Shia didn't stop rotating, repeating the action with the other ogres. It appeared more like playing than actual combat.

Each Frost ogre crashed into the wall at the same exact place, causing the wall to take considerable damage.

"Suzu will be nice to rabbits when we get home. It is not wise to anger them, we should be nice..."

"Suzu... I completely understand your feelings."

While trembling at the sight, Suzu muttered these statements. When they return home, she didn't want to hold the rabbits of Earth in fear.

"They're not that strong. The surprise attack from anyone... well, it's

okay if we take note."

Yue nodded slightly at what Hajime said, and Shizuku and her party were half smiling, because they were an enemy they wouldn't have a problem with if they were cooperating.

Afterwards, they encountered various traps. Ice spikes came from the walls; ice walls collapsed. Demons appeared from the walls for the next twelve hours as they explored the labyrinth maze.

While it wasn't extremely challenging, the continuous and monotonus scenery caused Kouki and the rest's attention to wander.

"Really, though we've walked and walked, Nagumo, how much further?"

Shizuku asked with a voice laced in exhaustion to Hajime's party, who seemed to be alright.

"Hmm? Because we're in a maze, the straight line distance won't be accurate. We seem to be about two kilometers from the entrance."

"Is that so?"

"Oh dear... let's take a rest a little if there is a suitable place."

"Fufu... thank you."

While looking at the state of Shizuku's companions, Hajime said while shrugging his shoulders. This caused her to smile broadly and got psyched up without noticing. However, Hajime's harem and Ryu noticed.

A while later they encountered a large double door, of which the compass indicated they needed to pass through.

"This is a spectacular door, too."

"... Nn, Pretty."

Looking up at the huge doors, they could see it wasn't just made of ice. It was carved with flowers, thorns and roses, with a large round hole that took up about the fourth of the door within the design.

Hajime, for the time being, tried using the full power of his body against the door; however, as he had suspected, the large double doors did not

budge at all.

"As I thought, the door won't open until we find whatever goes into that cavity. Really, how troublesome."

Hajime frowned, and the other members showed unpleasant expressions. It had already been more than fifteen hours since they had entered, and Kouki's group were showing faces that were quickly growing tired.

"... Hajime. For now..."

"That's right. For now, let's set up to rest."

Kouki's group gave out a relieved expression and let out sighs at Hajime's word. Obviously, their mental exhaustion had gathered considerably.

"You, stop going near the walls. It's likely they'll make a surprise attack, so come to the center if you're going to take a rest."

With that, Hajime stopped fifty meters away, took out a large tent from his Treasure Warehouse. While it wouldn't stop a surprise attack, it would provide shelter.

With surprise, Kouki and party entered into the tent that had appeared suddenly before their eyes, seeing a space of about ten tatami mats inside.

"... This is a kotatsu (Tn: heated table)"

"Waa... a soft and warm carpet..."

"Neither snow nor wind enter here. Is this a magical barrier...? It's a good temperature in this room."

"No, it's seriously comfortable! As expected of Nagumo."

Shizuku said with an amazed expression leveled at Hajime. The girls were already warming themselves in the kotatsu while Suzu crawled onto the fluffy carpet on all fours.

For the moment, it was impossible to remove their shoes within the large labyrinth. However, there's no problem keeping it clean. A fragment

of crystal attached to the carpet was imbued with regeneration magic. It automatically cleaned any dirt or detritus that touched the carpet. (Tn: Only the Japanese would be concerned about their shoes dirtying a tent floor on a camping trip :P)

Exactly, a space of healing.

The group warmed themselves enthusiastically in the kotatsu with drowsy faces, except Suzu, who was already asleep lying face down. Thanks to the artifact for protection against the cold, they didn't feel it so much, but after being surrounded by ice, everyone was happy to be in a warm space.

As such, while being surrounded by each side by Yue and Shia, Hajime took out some Cross bits.

While the group looked with popped eyes, they disappeared outside to create a ring around the tent in the passage.

"We shouldn't be bothered with those four patrolling outside. The cross bits will give us a chance to relax."

"... What's that?"

"As long as you have the credentials, they should have no problems."

"But do they know what they're guarding?"

"The cross bits have been set to guard around the gate."

To Shizuku's questioning face, and Kouki's scornful eyes, Hajime answered while inclining his head a little. Yue was at his side, placing a hand on his face.

"... Not tired?"

"This tent has a recovery function." (TN: Is that how he made Shia lose consciousness? Giggity)

Hajime smiled while Yue's hand softly stroked his face gently while fluttering heart marks drifted between the two of them.

And, at that time, two rabbit ears touched Hajime's neck, drawing his

attention to Shia. Shia drew her cheek near Hajime's shoulder with moistened upturned eyes that said "care for me too?".

Hajime drew an arm around Shia's waist and drew her close firmly. Doubling the heart marks going out. A pink space poured out, and you could almost swear the room temperature was increasing somehow.

While watching Tio and Kaori, who were slowly approaching them, Suzu muttered while on her own.

"... It seems that this space doesn't heal a lonely heart."

Kouki and the others agreed whole heartily.

Chapter 140 : Whispering voice

* Goshujin-sama – Japanese term for Master.

*

Howa, Howa, Fuwa, Fuwa.

Surely, if there were sounds to describe the current situation, it ought to be those words. Among the seven great labyrinths, there was a labyrinth called the ice and snow cave. And inside that labyrinth was a gigantic maze in which there was a sealed door before which laid a tent. The mood inside the tent had become a pink space.

"... Hajime. Aaa...n."

"Nn. Aaa...n... Mmn. It's good. As expected, the best thing to eat while using a kotatsu is stew."

"Hajime-san, have some of mine too. Aaa...n."

"Aaa...n... Mmn. Anyway, Shia, your cooking skills are improving every day, you will make a great wife."

"Je-Jeez, Hajime-san! Such a thing! To say that I'm extremely cute, and on top of that, I would make a lovely wife from whom you wouldn't want to be away for even a moment! You're making me blush-!"

"Hajime, what about me?"

"Nn? Isn't that obvious? You will become the best wife in the world."

"Nn... I will also do my best to learn how to cook."

"Fufufu, Yue-san, let's study together and make Hajime's favorite dishes."

While "Aaa...n" feeding Hajime, Yue and Shia, who were sitting on both sides of Hajime, were having a conversation from which no one could imagine they were inside one of the world's great labyrinths.

There was stew on top of the kotatsu. That was seafood stew prepared by Shia, the smell of which tickled every nose in the vicinity. The

ingredients had been acquired at the maritime town Erisen, frozen and stored inside the treasure warehouse.

Shia, with splendid knife-handling skills, had prepared the seafood along with various vegetables and seasoned the whole mix exquisitely. The sauce which looked like Ponzu (TL: citrus-based sauce, source wiki) was also neatly done and truly wonderful. Because her housework was also perfect, Hajime's praise of Shia being a great wife was no overstatement.

Nevertheless, Shia was over interpreting. Hajime who had become tolerant towards Shia's attitude didn't particularly mind nor snap her out of it.

Then, as Yue was lightly tugging at his sleeve while asking 'Will I become a good wife?' with the expression of a lover, Hajime could of course not disagree, especially when she wore a gentle smile and displayed such a willingness to train hard to learn homemaking.

"Ne, Nee, Hajime-kun? What about me? Housework and cooking are also two of my strong points you know? I'll make plenty of delicious dishes for my husband and properly welcome him every day, you know?"

"Goshujin-sama, Mistress also thinks she will become a good wife, you know? As you know, Mistress is a 'devoted wife'. She guarantees she will make Goshujin-sama feel satisfied every day! Right? So, please also give this mistress some words of praise."

Hajime, Yue and Shia's pink space was interrupted by Kaori and Tio's impatience. Clinging to Hajime from behind, they were begging with a sweet tone for the same words he said to Yue and Shia.

"... Maa, since originally Kaori was always monopolizing the first place of the 'I want to date her' and 'I want to marry her' category rankings at school, isn't she already a charming wife?"

"Mouu! Not that. I'm not asking about the general opinion, but Hajime-san's!"

"... Kaori. Why are you hurting yourself?"

“Yu-Yue!? What do you mean!?”

“... You’ve already come to understand. You’re still five, no, six years too soon.”

“Concrete numbers, huh! Uu, the path might be rugged, but I won’t lose!”

Yue answered in place of the evasive Hajime. With teary eyes, Kaori clenched her fists and renewed her determination. In truth, seeing how Kaori was not discouraged, Hajime’s heart softened, but he kept it secret for now.

“Umm, Goshujin-sama?”

Tio, with tearful eyes, was pressing for an answer. Two splendid watermelons were heavily riding on Hajime’s head, stroking him. She was obviously doing it on purpose.

“... You said ‘As you know’. But let’s see you state concretely the contents of the ‘devotion’ you speak of.”

“Mu? Isn’t that obvious? Of course, every day, be it morning, day or night, I will do ‘this-‘ and ‘that-‘ to Goshujin-sama, and then I will do ‘that-‘ and ‘this-‘ again. Then, Goshujin-sama will do “this-” to reward me right? That’s why I will return the favor by doing “that-“. Ah, I feel relieved. Doing “this-” and “that-” properly, then “that――――” Abababababababababa-!?”

“... You worthless dragon. You will be the only one I leave behind in this world.”

“Tio-san, restrain yourself a little...”

In response to Tio who was shamelessly continuing her indecent talk thoroughly, an ‘Abababa’ sound caused by Hajime’s ‘Lightning Clad’ interrupted Tio’s speech.

With a ‘PikuPiku’ sound, Tio kept convulsing without getting up. The lightning seemed really effective. Even Shia was stunned at the appearance of such a Tio.

However, since ‘I will leave you behind’ was meant as threatening words, it could be quite naturally assumed he was planning on taking her along as well.

The fact that Tio was standing close to Hajime was obviously the proof she was spontaneously asking Hajime’s permission to be by his side.

Kouki and the others were sitting on a kotatsu on the opposite side, silently pecking at their stew while trying their best to ignore the ongoing scene. However, barely able to put up with the irresponsible and irritating scene, their chopsticks were continuously shaking in frustration.

“Kouki... even though I thought I had gotten used to this kind of commotion...”

“Don’t talk about that, Ryuutaro, my mind can’t take it anymore...”

“Isn’t it a good thing? Objectively seeing how we used to be?”

“Used to be? Could it be you are actually angry at...? No, forget it.”

Kouki was glancing at Hajime and Kaori with an extremely complicated expression and speaking in a low voice with Ryuutaro whose face showed deep annoyance. Strangely, the usually sarcastic Shizuku remained quiet, roughly snatching fish from the stew. She would gaze at Hajime from time to time, obviously irritated. Suzu, who had brought up the topic, shrank back spontaneously each time she was remembered of the fuss.

And, at that moment, Hajime set down his chopsticks (which he was barely using because of being ‘Aaa...n’ed all the time) and took out a shiny gray metal plate from his pocket. It had an uneven sharp tip and a magic square engraved on it. It was a ‘gate key’ which connected space.

Hajime suddenly turned back and projected the key. It was connected to the cross bits he had sent looking for the key to open the sealed door that prevented them from proceeding further. At the center of the plate which had stuck into space, a gate opened. On the other side of the gate was a gem-like object emitting yellow light from a pedestal in a room surrounded by ice walls.

Furthermore, there was one more thing.

“GuruaAAAAAAA!!!”

From the other side of the gem, there was also the form of a five-meter tall furious-looking frost ogre approaching.

“Bufu!?” X4

Kouki and the others who were seated at the kotatsu and pecking at their stew all simultaneously spewed it out. At any rate, their meal was interrupted by a war cry and they were suddenly being approached by an ogre clearly on a different level than the ogres they had confronted so far. It was pointless to tell them not to panic.

However, Hajime didn’t particularly panic and extended his hand through the gate, picked up the yellow gem. In exchange, he simply extracted a metal ball about twice as big as a basketball from his treasure warehouse. A ‘Bachi’ sound resounded as he instantly poured electricity inside, after which he casually threw the ball through the gate as if throwing trash away.

Then, he immediately turned the key, closing the gate, and retrieving it.

Immediately thereafter,

ZudoOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!

From a distant place, the sound of a ridiculously powerful explosion reverberated as the air started vibrating.

Hajime sat down and picked up his chopsticks as if nothing had particularly happened. The gem clad in yellow light on top of the table was proof that this series of unbelievable events took place in their reality.

“... Hajime. Aaa~n.”

“Hajime-san, Aaa~n desu.”

And, as expected, Yue and Shia also resumed the ‘Aaa~n’ as if nothing had happened. Kouki and the others who had been dripping cold sweat snapped back to reality and simultaneously opened their mouths.

“No, no, no, no, there’s definitely something not right, right!?!?” X4

“Nn?”

Hajime, whose mouth was being stuffed with fresh seafood by Kaori and Tio who entered the feeding competition, tilted his head as if to say ‘what’s wrong?’.

With an expression not hiding his irritation towards Hajime’s behavior, Kouki inquired.

“Nagumo. What was that earlier?”

“Earlier you say… But you were looking, weren’t you?”

“I was! But not that! I’m talking about what you did!”

“What I did… you ask strange things. It’s just as you saw, right?”

Hajime gave Kouki a gaze questioning his sanity after Kouki raised his voice. Not having obtained the response he was seeking, Kouki looked ready to flip the table over in anger at any moment.

Shizuku came to the emotionally unstable Kouki while rubbing her forehead as if putting up with a headache and tried to explain the ‘as you saw’ part to Kouki.

“In short, Nagumo-kun found this yellow gem you can see with his cross bits, and retrieved it using ‘gate’. It’s likely that the moment the cross bits intruded the place where the gem used to be, some monster supposed to be its guardian or something reacted angrily, before being killed by the bomb Nagumo-kun tossed away through the gate…. or so I guess.”

“Ah. It’s completely as you say. Just like what you saw, right?”

“That’s what I’m saying! Isn’t there something wrong with this! You normally don’t just go around directly confronting a guardian keeping the dungeon’s treasure, defeating it, and retrieving the prize like that!”

Kouki was honestly saying something trivial.

“No, isn’t it better to collect them easily like this? It would be a bother to be busy chasing after each one of the four keys ourselves, right?”

“Th-That may be so. But if we don’t follow the rules, will our progress

be acknowledged by the labyrinth…"

"Once or twice should be alright. We did take a considerable shortcut at the Great Volcano, and our capture was acknowledged with no problem after all. It should be fine if Yue's group and Amanogawa's group respectively defeat the guardians of the two remaining keys and retrieve them. I'll map a route for you."

"Uu… Is the difficulty alright? It's the capture of a great labyrinth after all?"

"Kouki… Stop thinking too deeply about Nagumo. You don't want stomach pain at that age."

Kouki was holding his head between his hands. Ryuutaro patted his shoulders with an expression of sympathy.

"That's right. Nagumo-kun is the walking embodiment of irrationality. There's nothing to be surprised about."

"Shizu, Shizu…… When Suzu thinks about Guardian-san, she becomes excessively sad for some reason. If another Guardian-san is dragged out by Nagumo-kun, I think things will definitely look bad. So let's work hard to preserve our sanity?"

Ryuutaro approved the advice a sad-looking Suzu had given Shizuku as Suzu was gulping down fish and turned to her in turn.

"It seems it would also be difficult for me to have the 'common sense' I have conceived so far be damaged any further by Hajime. I have to agree with Suzu's suggestion."

Kouki and his group had satisfied their hunger and were pecking at the last remnants of their food when the sound of a second explosion reverberated through the great labyrinth.

～～～～～～～～～～～～～～～～～～～～～～～～～～～～

"I wonder if Shizuku-chan and the others are fine…"

Kaori's worried voice echoed.

They were before the two sealed doors.

Three gems had already been put into the door's corresponding sockets. Of the three, aside from two gems Hajime had obtained effortlessly, the other had been brought by Yue's team, who had easily defeated the gem's guardian and seized its key, which was to be expected given their ability.

Only one key was remaining, the last gem. It was the gem Kouki's team headed to while being guided by one of Hajime's Cross bits. As a result of splitting into two groups, Kaori had grown anxious, wondering if Kouki's team would be able to defeat the last gem's guardian safely.

"Looks like there's no problem. They had a hard fight, but it looks like they managed to bring it down. They don't have any severe injuries. At some point, it did seem like Ryuutaro had frostbite but it was immediately healed."

"Thank god."

Kaori breathed a sigh of relief after hearing the information conveyed through the cross bits.

Hajime moved the cross bit standing before Kouki's team who were finished with their battle and had retrieved the last key. At the same time, using 'gate key', Hajime connected the space between their location and the cross bit. Space softly distorted, and the appearance of Kouki and the others who had a strangely refreshed expression could be seen on the other side.

"Somehow, you guys look happy..."

"Umu. They are most likely relieved to have been able to properly pass the maze's trial."

Shia was tilting her head pondering the reason for their happy faces when Tio answered her question with a seemingly pleasant expression. She was right on the mark.

Kouki, who was holding the gem in his hand, passed through the gate, went past Shia's group and headed towards the sealed doors. There, he inserted the gem into the last socket.

Immediately after, the thorny shrub on the door was covered in light.

The gems started to shine brightly in all their splendor. Then, the gate's impressive doors began opening on their own.

At a glance, the passage starting from the entrance of the gate looked no different from the labyrinth's passages so far. If anything was different, it seemed to be the bright reflection of the ice walls. Hajime and the others' figures were vividly reflected.

"Well then, let's go."

Following Hajime's order, everyone simultaneously stepped through the door. The sight before them, sure enough, gave off the feeling of a mirror house. The ice acted just like mirrors. The bright light was reflected endlessly. Indeed, the ice walls on both sides of the passage acted like opposite mirrors, and Hajime's party was reflected a countless number of times.

Aside from the ceiling hidden by a spray of snow, it looked really like an endless corridor. The intense reflectivity of the ice made it clear it was no simple ice. If not for the chilling cold it radiated, it could maybe even be mistaken for a mirror.

A 'Kotsu, Kotsu' sound echoed along with the footsteps of Hajime's party as they proceeded. Not only light, sounds also seemed to reverberate.

"... Somehow it feels like we've been sucked into something."

Yue muttered while walking by Hajime's side and looking at their reflections in the walls.

The worlds piled up inside the ice walls repeated endlessly, the deepest parts being shrouded in darkness. Yue's words were truly right on the mark.

Hajime gently grasped Yue's hand.

"I won't let go of you so it's alright."

"... Nn."

"You guys, can you not stop flirting at every occasion?"

Shizuku's reproachful eyes dug into Hajime and Yue who were exchanging smiles. However, their love had already far exceeded the maximum theoretical threshold. Such a remark didn't make them flinch.

Giving a sidelong glance to Shizuku who sighed, the group continued advancing.

They had not encountered the sign of any traps or monsters in a while and the compass was indicating that they were on the right way when Kouki suddenly halted and started looking around restlessly.

Shizuku, representing the group who grew suspicious of his behavior, inquired.

"Kouki? What's the matter?"

"Ah, no well, didn't you hear something just now? Something like someone's voice. Rather, a whisper like this..."

"Wa-Wait a minute Kouki-kun, Stop. We already had our fill of this at Merujiine's Undersea Ruin."

It seemed Kouki could hear someone's whisper. Since she didn't think it possible for anyone else to actually be there beside them, Kaori whose tolerance of horror was weak tightly hugged herself with both arms while raising a voice of protest.

"Isn't there anyone else who heard something? Shia?"

Hajime quietly narrowed his eyes and looked around to confirm.

"No. I didn't hear anything. And I sense no sign of anyone else here besides us."

Shia who had closed her eyes and focused her rabbit ears answered while shaking her head negatively. The other members who also seemed not to have heard anything, in particular, all shook their heads in negation.

"... Surely, I thought I heard something..."

"Are you sure you're not overthinking this?"

"... Maybe I am."

Understanding he was the only one who heard it, Kouki wondered if it was his imagination as he showed a bewildered expression. A concerned Ryuutaro who displayed a face lacking his usual self-confidence also agreed.

"... Shia."

"Got it."

While everyone was thinking it was Kouki's imagination, only Hajime, with a look reminding them to be careful, passed on his thought to Shia who could be relied on to search for the enemy in such circumstances. Shia also thought it was only Kouki's imagination, but since she was given a request by Hajime, she obediently nodded her head in approval. Her rabbit ears shook.

Then, they kept advancing without any problems, crossing several junctions without getting lost, until Kouki halted one more time.

This time, he shouted.

"Ah, again! It wasn't my imagination after all! I heard it again!"

"Ko-Kouki?"

Shizuki and the others turned a bewildered look to Kouki who was frantically searching for the owner of the voice.

From the gazes turned to him, Kouki guessed no one besides him had heard the voice this time as well, and raised a chaotic voice.

"It's true! This time, I heard it clearly! It said: 'Is it fine like this?'!"

"No, Kouki. I didn't hear anything?"

"Shit! Who are you! Where are you! How about showing your face without sneaking around!"

"Kouki, calm down."

Anxious to be the only one to hear, Kouki had turned around and let out these harsh words at the empty space. Shizuku and the others moved to

try to calm him down.

"Shia."

"No, me neither. I really didn't hear anything..."

Hajime checked with Shia for confirmation, but it seems Shia's rabbit ears did not grasp the sound of any voice this time either.

"... Hajime. Any magical response?"

"None. It was the same with the zombies back then, it would seem the ice walls most likely have some kind of ability which conceals any magical response. The demon eye stone can't really be relied on here."

"Fumu. There's also the possibility of having lost to the great labyrinth's pressure and our minds having been confused... But still, this is too sudden. It would be more reasonable to assume we are receiving some kind of interference."

"But Shia's ears can't hear anything, and on top of that Hajime can't sense anything. There is nothing we can do to stop it."

While Hajime and the others were discussing, Kouki was desperately trying to find the owner of the voice to prove he had not gone insane. At this point, Hajime spoke to him.

"Amenogawa, for now, calm down."

"... Nagumo, it's true. I'm sure I heard it.... ..."

"I know. I don't intend to dismiss this issue saying it's your imagination."

"Eh?"

Having gotten used to receiving harsh treatment from Hajime, Kouki's eyes started going in circles after he heard these words which seemed to indicate he believed him.

"We should assume we are receiving some kind of interference. If it's one of the trials of the labyrinth, then the possibility of not only you but everyone here receiving the interference is high. Currently, I can't think

of a way to counter this. Everyone, be on your guard."

Hajime turned a serious gaze towards the others. They exchanged glances once and nodded.

Indeed, instead of rejecting the fault on Kouki's imagination, to deny the existence of an unexplainable phenomenon, it was better to word it as the labyrinth's 'interference'. He believed Kouki's words. It wouldn't be strange for such a phenomenon to happen since they were challenging a great labyrinth after all.

Kouki was showing a very complicated expression, but he seemed to have calmed down for now. He was silently following behind Hajime who had resumed walking while having ominous thoughts about their images reflected in the ice walls.

And then,

—— You did not believe

"Uu, again..."

A whisper smoothly entered Kouki's ear one more time. But since he had given some thought to Hajime's words about a possible interference from the great labyrinth and readied himself, he was not thrown into confusion this time.

It was hard to say if he was calm deep down, but he was now able to try to look for the origin of the voice calmly. Then, Kouki suddenly realized something.

"..... Have I already heard this voice?"

Somehow he had a feeling he had already heard this voice. Shizuku and the others turned a worried look to Kouki who had tilted his head and was searching his memory.

"Kouki. Are you okay?"

"Ah, Yes. I'm fine. I was just thinking, I may have already heard that voice somewhere....."

"... There were monsters with the ability to mimic people's appearance

and voice at the Haltina Sea of Trees. Maybe they're imitating someone we know. Don't be deceived. If something happens, say it immediately."

"Thank you, Shizuku. You be careful too. If Hajime is right, you might hear a voice too sooner or later."

"Got it. I'll be careful."

Kouki sensed his disordered mind had calmed down and was able to show some composure to Shizuku who was smiling faintly. He returned a smile to his childhood friend who always encouraged and supported him.

—— You have realized, right?

However, his face immediately stiffened at the voice which once again resounded. He got unpleasant goosebumps after being unable to brush away the uneasiness dwelling in his heart born from the whispers he heard.

Kouki unintentionally turned his head towards Shizuku who was walking by his side with a face seeming to request help.

However, the look of concern he was expecting to see on his childhood friend's face was nowhere to be seen. Instead, she displayed an expression about as stiffened as the reflection of his own face in the ice walls.

"Shizuku....."

"......Yeah. I just heard it too. It was a woman's voice. I have also heard it somewhere before. 'Averting your eyes again?' is what it said."

"... Mine was a male voice saying 'You have realized, right?'. It looks like the words change according to the person who hears the voice."

Kouki and Shizuku were looking at each other with complicated expressions, and next, 'Hyaaa!'. Suzu slightly jumped with a shriek. It seems Suzu could hear it as well now.

Furthermore, Ryuutaro, who also seemed to have heard it, became confused and started looking around.

"What did it say to you guys?"

Hajime asked them about the content while looking over his shoulder.

Once he had heard everyone's description of what they heard, he was planning on putting them together to figure out the aim of the great labyrinth.

"Um, Suzu heard something like Kouki. (TL: She's talking in the third person). 'You had really realized, right?' is what it said."

"Ah, mine was 'What is there the need to hesitate for?' ."

Both were making a seemingly displeased expression. A discomfort revealed itself on their faces, the kind of feeling of someone's heart being tread upon by muddy feet.

"... That's too abstract. I feel it's too indirect to be able to seduce anyone..."

Hajime tilted his head. These were no words such as 'Do this and that' or 'Go here and there' which could immediately lead people astray from their goal.

"You two. Had you heard that voice before?"

"Un. Now that you mention it, I feel like I had heard it somewhere... maybe."

"I also have the feeling I had already heard it."

They nodded to Tio in confirmation. The words whispered varied but in the end, they were all whispered by a familiar voice or so it seemed.

"... Anyway, we have to move forward."

"Maa, that's right."

They had a bad feeling, but stopping and worrying would do no good. Once they got out of the maze, maybe the whispering would stop. So, as Yue said, they should move forward for now.

After deciding to proceed forward, they came across multiple forks and kept going without getting lost. According to the information given by the compass, there were three kilometers left in a straight line until the exit.

Because they wouldn't get lost, even if they ran into traps or monsters, they could get there in not even half a day.

They hurried forward while doing their best to ignore the whisper which would be heard intermittently.

However, as time passed, the frequency of the whispers increased, and before they knew it, Hajime and his group started hearing it too.

—— You will be betrayed again

Yue heard. Those were toxic words which caused her to remember that she had once placed her trust in her uncle, family, and fellow retainers. 'Again'. Yue could very well guess the meaning of these words.

—— You will lose them again by your own fault, you know?

The voice made Shia's rabbit ears tremble. The origin of the tragedy which took away the lives of countless of her family members was indeed Shia's own birth. It had taken root deep inside Shia's heart and caused her to have countless nightmares. The voice was constantly reminding her of their death cries. Now, she had plenty of 'important ones' close to her she absolutely didn't want to lose.

—— There is no such thing as your being accepted by others

Tio heard the voice which had invaded her mind whisper to her smoothly.

Long ago, when she was inexperienced and couldn't control her power, and her family was facing persecution... Fire surged, the sound of an explosion shook the atmosphere, a scream and an angry roar reverberated. While she was kicking at the gathered remains of her compatriot, the surrounding eyes were staring at her with extreme fear and contempt...

—— You're jealous to the point you want to kill, isn't that right?

Whispered a voice which had invaded Kaori's inner heart. Kaori unconsciously turned towards the girlfriend who was showing an air of composure and stood at a place Kaori couldn't reach even after swapping

bodies and obtaining power. Something black gushed out and started spreading out like black ink spilling on a white sheet of paper.

"Ah. I get it. This is my own voice."

Everyone who was having their consciousnesses torn apart by the whispers were taken aback by Hajime's sudden declaration.

"... Hajime?"

Hajime answered Yue's inquiring gaze while not particularly looking bothered by the whispers.

"Everyone, you said you had already heard the voice whispering to you right? Same goes for me, but the voice whispering to me is my own voice. Back when I was helping my father make games, I had the opportunity to listen to my own voice many times when doing voice tests. Since if you listen to your own voice, you are bound to feel some sense of discomfort. It's hard to realize, but I can assure you after having listened to my own voice countless times that the voice whispering to me is my own voice."

'Ah now that you mention it...' was the expression starting to form on everyone's face. Your own voice you hear when you speak in everyday life tends to unexpectedly differ from your recorded voice which you listen to. Therefore, they had been unable to recognize their own voice.

"But, if that's true, then what the voice is saying..."

"... It could be a voice coming from deep within your heart... maybe. Reviving various unpleasant memories."

"... Right. It feels as if our mind is being invaded and trampled by muddy shoes. It's extremely unpleasant."

Tio, making a guess, stated what a frowning Kaori was hesitating to say. Shia agreed. The others uniformly showed dark, grim faces.

Overall, the atmosphere could be said to be still. Shizuku, who realized this, raised her voice in an attempt to change the mood and spoke to Hajime and Yue who were looking calm and composed for some reason.

"Nagumo-kun and Yue don't seem to be affected very much, is that

correct? Do you have some kind of countermeasure?"

Hajime and Yue exchanged glances. Then, Hajime wore a composed expression, while Yue showed a somewhat bewitching smile.

"What if I say I am just not paying particular attention to it?"

"... What did you hear?"

"Ah ~ something like 'Do you think a murderer could live such a thing as a normal life?' or 'There is no place where a monster belongs, right?' or things along those lines, repeatedly. I don't think there's anything really different."

"That's... referring to when we return to Japan?"

"Ah, that's right. Maa, it's also hard to say if I'm human after all. Maybe I'm wondering deep down if I will be able to get used to my former life again."

To Hajime who was making a self-analysis quite indifferently, Kouki whose gloomy face showed more and more anguish as time passed managed to squeeze out a voice.

"Then, how do you manage to remain calm? You who are ready to forsake this world's inhabitants and want to return home, after being told multiple times that even if you managed to make it back, you'd have no place where you belong, how the hell can you stay so calm!"

Kouki demanded an explanation. He was no longer able to hold back his irritation at the end of his sentence and his voice roughened. It looks like the voice he was hearing from his heart was considerably shaking his mind.

Hajime simply shrugged his shoulders and answered.

"Don't lose your temper. Actually, even though I won't know the answer until I try going back, worrying about it now is pointless, right?"

"How can you be convinced so easily? It's something you can't ignore, something which enters your mind and you can't throw out, something there is nothing you can do about!"

Just what kind of voice did you hear? Kouki was almost yelling those words at Hajime while hiding his fury caused by hatred somewhere within him.

Hajime faced the emotionally unstable Kouki with a somewhat serious look.

"First, from wishing things to 'be your way', greed will be born. Next, to appease that greed, your heart will take a decision. Then, all that needs to be done is to carry out this decision to the end. You shouldn't be worrying about things like: 'Will I be able to do it or not?' but rather: 'What should I do to carry out this decision?'... I have already decided. I will return to my hometown and live a normal life with Yue and the others. I will show them lots of splendid things and introduce them to my parents. I will put my life on the line for that. There is no time to worry about something as trivial as the anxiety that rose from the decision I made."

"... That's absurd. Such a thing..."

"It's not like I'm asking you to understand. Maybe my way of thinking isn't very human-like."

Hajime wouldn't waver no matter what he was told, no matter what was done to him. Kouki felt he saw the main points of Hajime's unwavering mind and didn't think he could understand them. However, he averted his gaze as he seemed to realize something.

Inside the delicate atmosphere, Shia's face, which was irritated due to the uneasiness caused by the whispers, was replaced with a friendly smile as she started looking for Yue.

It seems that Shia was also able to easily slip away from the abusive thoughts caused by the unpleasant whispers. Her mood quickly turned from the gloomy one caused by this place to her usual innocent one.

Despite also being seized in anguish originally, Shizuku, who had been able to guess what was going on to some extent and had been speaking to Hajime, was now completely silent, reflecting on Hajime's previous words as if she had realized something.

“I get it that Hajime-san is not being affected thanks to his shamelessness, but why does Yue-san look fine? Rather, what is Yue-san being whispered?”

Hajime’s temple suddenly reacted to Shia’s way of speaking of him, but it seems he read the mood and decided to let her off with it for now. Of course, the night after the capture of the great labyrinth, she will be made to cry in lots of different ways.

Yue who aroused Shia’s interest answered with no particular hesitation.

“... It’s repeatedly telling me I will be betrayed some way or another.”

“Betrayed... If I’m not mistaken, like in your past...”

“... Nn. So things like ‘Hajime and Shia will also betray you’.”

Upon hearing these words, Hajime and Shia exchanged glances. If those whispers really stem from one’s unconscious, it means Yue is fearing betrayal from the bottom of her heart.

Indeed, Yue had been betrayed by the family and retainers she put her trust in and had been locked up in darkness for three hundred years. That’s more than reason enough for it to become a trauma, and it wouldn’t be strange if she felt ill to the point of not ever trusting anyone else anymore.

Actually, putting aside Hajime and Shia, her interaction with others could be said to be fairly cold sometimes. Fundamentally, earning Yue’s trust was quite difficult. Luckily, her encounter with Hajime made her believe that putting her trust in others was still possible... But maybe the uneasiness of being betrayed again still dwelled within her heart, even if just a little.

Even more, than her memories of her severe betrayal, this was something that couldn’t be helped. She was not actually suspecting that she’d be betrayed again. Rather, this was something carved deep within her unconscious.

However, naturally, there was trust in Hajime and Shia that easily surpassed such a trauma. A fantastic encounter and the things she saw

on the journey that followed had appeased her heart. Which is why she was calm.

Sensing her feelings, Shia gave her a soft smile and spoke.

"Ne, Fufu, if you let your guard down, I might betray you-"

"... Bad girl. Punishment is needed for lying rabbits."

With Yue and Shia resuming their frivolous talk, the atmosphere seemed to slightly return to normal.

"Maa, certainly, there is no way I am letting go of Yue..."

"Indeed. It would be much more likely to be told that the world is getting destroyed tomorrow than Goshujin-sama betraying Yue."

A triumphant look settled on Hajime and Tio's face. Indeed, Hajime and Yue's atmosphere was so sweet that it felt like a mix of Calpis (TL: Japanese milk-based soft drink) with sugar, syrup, and honey. If you were told one would betray the other, you could only reply 'Ha?'.

"... Nn. It's impossible. But even if I was betrayed, it would be of no concern."

Yue agreed with Hajime and Tio's words, but as if she had thought of something along the way, she made an assumption as her pupils sparkled with mischief.

"What do you...?"

With an air of composure, Yue responded to Hajime and the others who tilted their heads.

"Because regardless of Hajime's feelings, I am not letting go of him."

"..." X4

While everyone fell strangely silent, Yue, who was licking her thin pink lips with her tongue, suddenly narrowed her eyes. No one was able to take their eyes from her wet lips which frightfully stood out. Simultaneously, she began emitting a charm that sent shivers down everyone's spine, male or female indiscriminately and made their abdomens feel hot.

Then, with a hot, long breath.

“... Fufu, you can’t run away from the vampire princess.”

She declared such a thing.

Hajime, who was caught in the overly bewitching atmosphere and her hot gaze, had his arms suddenly held behind his back by Shia who showed a splendid reaction time.

If not for her, there’s no mistaking Hajime would probably already be on top of Yue. No matter how you looked at him, he was no longer thinking straight. He was looking at Yue like a beast.

For a little while, the unproductive argument continued between Shia and the others who were trying to prevent a love affair in the middle of the capture of a great labyrinth and Hajime who was wishing for nothing but Yue.

At any rate, for the time being, it seems the oppressive atmosphere caused by the whispers was gone.

Chapter 141 : The Brunt of Feelings

*

“Aa, geez! Cut it outttt!”

In a small room in the eastern part of the great labyrinth, Shia’s angry voice resounded followed by a creaking noise.

The source of the noise was Hajime’s arm, which was in an arm-lock (TLN: the term used is Ude-Hishigi-Juji-Gatame, a grappling technique from Kodokan Judo).

“What are you doing, Shia? His arm looks like it’s about to break.”

“What are you saying with this calm face? Rather, Yue-san, please stop with the provocations!”

“... Nn. Hajime wishes for me but has to hold himself back because we’re inside the maze... cute.”

“Now’s neither the time nor the place for this!” Shia violently retorted.

Of course, her arm-lock over Hajime did not budge in the slightest. It was proof of her remarkable growth. Something to rejoice about.

Or so it should have been. She was holding Yue in her arms nonchalantly and threatening the approaching Hajime with a judo locking technique. There was really nothing to rejoice about.

They were currently taking a short break in a small room close to a junction of the labyrinth.

More precisely, the break was intended to let Kouki and the others rest. They were in low spirits from the disorder caused by the whispers. However, for some reason, the more intense the whispers grew, the greater a chance it became for Hajime and Yue to assure their mutual love, which had gone past the point of reason. ‘You’re flirting far too much inside a great labyrinth, Koraa!’ was probably what Shia thought as she stepped in to hold them back.

“Calm down, Shia. We’re in the great labyrinth, you know? It’s not like

we're really going to start acting without restraint here, right?"

"... Just now, weren't you about to kiss?"

"That was just Yue replenishing her energy."

Hajime tried to exploit this opportunity and came up with this explanation, showing a firm face. But a mere glance at Yue by his side, who had narrowed her eyes while licking her lips, would be enough to make his declaration really suspicious.

"But I didn't see her using her magic to the point she would need to replenish."

Shia replied with an unusually sharp observation and tightened her grip on Hajime's arm further.

"No mercy, huh... "

"Th-That's because he's my lover. So I will have my say about things that go too far!"

"Shia... Good girl."

Shia blushed slightly as she gave her reasoning. Hajime and Yue let out a 'Ho' and voiced their admiration. Then they corrected their postures.

So far, Shia had always followed Hajime and Yue from behind. However, now that she had been acknowledged by Hajime, it seemed she came to the realization that she could stand on equal ground with Yue.

She used to watch the two from behind and deal with things she didn't like from a distance. But now she was walking side by side with them and wouldn't hesitate to take their hands and pull.

"Fumu, indeed, just like a lover."

"Un. Indeed."

Tio let out a weak murmur, exposing her mental fatigue. Next to her, Kaori forced a bitter smile as she agreed. There was envy in her eyes.

"..."

"Shizu, Shizu? Is something up?"

“Eh? No, it’s nothing? More importantly, is Suzu okay?”

Seeing Shizuku watching Hajime and the others silently, Suzu raised a voice of concern.

Suzu also felt the pain caused by the whispers which was somehow similar to that of a needle piercing the heart. But she also remembered what it felt like to be truly stabbed and could somehow put up with the pain. However, she noticed no one was paying attention to Shizuku who didn’t seem to be doing so well.

Usually, Shizuku would discreetly put aside her own feelings and only worry about others. Given her behavior, it was obvious that something was up.

However, or rather as expected, as soon as she was called by Suzu, Shizuku put on a delicate smile and replied to Suzu by questioning Suzu about her own well-being. Suzu’s face certainly did not look very well either, but putting aside Shizuku’s abstract words which didn’t betray her condition, Shizuku should also be feeling exhaustion due to the whispers teasing her heart.

With a troubled smile, Suzu could only reply ‘I’m fine’ in order to not worry Shizuku over her and in the process forget taking care of herself.

“Oi, Kouki...”

“What is it, Ryuutaro?”

“Ah, no, nothing in particular. Let’s just leave this sickening place quickly.”

“Yeah.”

Then again, Kouki was the person affected the most dangerously. Speaking almost no word at all, keeping replies only to a bare minimum when Shizuku, Ryuutaro or Suzu would voice their concern.

And then, there was also his look, which was getting increasingly intense and reflecting his negative feelings.

His look was directed at Hajime. Maybe the person himself wanted to

take his eyes off of Hajime, but he was too obvious. Sometimes, he would also turn his gaze to Kaori. So it was not difficult to guess what he was being told by the whispers.

"Well then, how did it go? Everyone, did you get somewhat better?"

Tio asked, tilting her head. It had already been one hour since they started to rest. Tio had suggested they use spirit magic on everyone to stabilize their minds.

"Yup. Thanks, Tio. I feel that the inside of my head has become clear."

"Un. Maybe my body also got a little lighter..."

After all, the whispers were mere voices. What was tormenting Shizuku's mind was her being reminded of every bad memory and thought that had piled up inside her. That's why, if the person herself was repeatedly worrying after being reminded of unpleasant memories, spirit magic wouldn't be any help. It was only magic that could refresh one's spirits temporarily.

Even so, compared to how they were before resting, the faces of Shizuku's group had considerably regained their colors. Therefore, even taking into account the consumption of magical power the use of spirit magic required, it seemed to have been a wise choice.

Nevertheless, it seemed there was someone for whom that wasn't the case.

"Ah. Thanks, Tio-san. I feel more comfortable."

Although Kouki slightly smiled and expressed his thanks, there was an unmistakable weight in his voice which betrayed his statement. His face seemed shadowed somehow.

"Don't thank me. More importantly, we must hurry up and get out of this maze. Goshujin-sama. How much is left?"

"U... n, let's see. In a straight line, there's not even one kilometer left. It won't go well if we keep resting in this place, so we should go without stopping," Hajime said and stood up with his compass in hand.

The others followed suit. The previous atmosphere when they were fooling around had completely vanished. Most of it was truly intended to refresh their spirits. Definitely, surely, maybe...

Shizuku and the others seemed to be feeling a little heavy. It had already been thirty hours since they entered the maze, and they had not gotten a wink of sleep. They had been using magic and magic potions to recover from the lack of sleep, but the mental fatigue caused by the whispers had been accumulating as well.

They resumed walking along the mirror-house-like passage. As usual, even after resting, the abstract whispers, using their own voices, were reverberating inside their ears unpleasantly and reminding them of things they disliked. The frost ogres coming after them sporadically, along with the annoying traps, were clearly meant to make them drop their concentration and significantly increased the danger.

“Shit.”

Just now, Kouki, who was following behind Hajime, received yet another surprise attack from an ogre, defeated it, and hit the ice wall with his fist while swearing.

—— It ended up like this again?

—— As I said, it will be stolen

—— If only I had power

And so the whispers continued. Kouki’s frustration kept accumulating.

Then, at that time, he had an uncomfortable feeling after looking up at his own image reflected in the ice wall ahead. It’s not that something was strange. What was being reflected was his own face. It’s just that he was looking at himself devoid of any expression. But strangely, he couldn’t stop staring.

“... What the hell?” Kouki muttered unintentionally.

Then, he became aware of the true reason of his uncomfortable feeling and a shiver ran down his spine.

His face reflected in the ice wall stood as firm as a rock... expressionless. Neither his irritated frown nor the sight of his gritting his teeth out of exasperation, were anywhere to be seen. Also, his lips which were supposed to have been moving just now after he muttered something...

He stiffened and opened his eyes wide. The Kouki reflected before him... suddenly parted his lips.

"UwaAAAA!?"

"Ko-Kouki!? What happened!?"

"Are you okay, Kouki!"

Kouki jumped back from the ice wall after hearing the sudden strange voice. Shizuku and Ryuutaro became confused and called out to him. Hajime and the others also turned around to see what was going on and stared at Kouki in wonder.

Cold sweat was running down his spine, and his breathing rhythm was thrown out of order by the mental strain he felt. But still, he managed to draw and point his holy sword towards his reflected self in the ice wall. His reflection in the ice wall also drew his holy sword and did the same, with the same facial expression and breathing rhythm. Kouki no longer sensed the intense unpleasant feeling he had been feeling up until a few moments ago.

"Kouki?"

Shizuku approached him with a worried face and put her hand on his shoulder. He did not break his stance and kept breathing roughly. He suddenly came to and managed to regain some of his composure before opening his mouth.

"... In the wall, the me reflected in the wall laughed. Even though I didn't laugh... Just as if it were a different me..."

"Are you sure it wasn't your imagination?"

Shizuku took a breath after listening to Kouki's words and turned a

serious gaze to Kouki's reflection in the ice wall, as well as her own.

However, Kouki quickly turned his face towards Shizuku. He was irritated.

"... You won't believe me?"

"Eh? No, it's not like I'm doubting you?"

It seemed Kouki thought Shizuku's words were expressing her doubts about what he stated. Of course, that wasn't Shizuku's intention. She just wanted confirmation from him. Actually, she had even turned a wary gaze towards the ice wall. That's why, when she heard Kouki's next sentence, she thought 'What could he be saying?' as her face became suspicious.

This seemed to irritate Kouki even further, and a sarcasm unlike him escaped his mouth.

"... If it was Nagumo, you would believe him easily, right?"

"Kouki? Really, what are you saying now? Didn't I tell you I believed you?"

Although Shizuku frowned angrily in response to his sarcasm for a moment, her face immediately became worried the next moment.

Kouki was able to calm down a little after seeing she was worried about him, but immediately after, her body suddenly started quivering as if she had just been whispered something. She then took a fleeting glance at Hajime. It was truly just a moment, as she averted her eyes right after she saw Hajime. But it seemed it was more than enough to make a heavy emotion well up inside Kouki.

"For now there's no sign of the reflections moving on their own... but let's be careful as much as possible."

Hajime had also been diligently observing their reflections using his demon eye stone, but he breathed out a sigh before long and gave the command to be careful. He ignored the argument between Kouki and Shizuku.

The other members had been listening to the argument and watching

the two. When they received Hajime's order, they nodded and resumed walking.

Then, witnessing no such weird phenomenon such as their reflections' actions differing from their own, the party finally discovered a large room at the end of the passage. Inside the room, there were gigantic gates which had a design a lot like the previously sealed doors they saw. Because the gates had no dent where something could be inserted, unlike the previous sealed doors, it seemed they would not need to go through the trouble of doing something like collecting gems one more time. Checking the compass, it seemed there was no mistake about this place being their goal.

"Fuu, looks like we finally made it. These gates are the goal. However..."

"Nn... it's obviously suspicious."

"Right. You would normally expect to be attacked once you get here."

Having gotten tired of the maze as well, Hajime breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the goal and used his demon eye stone and perception abilities to search for the enemy. It was trivial that it would be far too easy and uninteresting for there not to be anything taking place in the big room right before the goal. Agreeing, Yue and the others started exercising caution.

"... As expected, no response. Maa, there's no choice left but to proceed."

As expected, Hajime perceived no magical response. He raised his eyebrows and walked ahead as the vanguard. Yue and the others followed behind.

Then, by the time they reached the center of the room, sure enough, it happened.

"Ah...? The sun?"

Hajime pronounced these words as he looked up towards the source from which light suddenly started pouring down. If Yue and the others were to look up as well, they could indeed only call this 'the sun'.

Shining from a single point in the spray of snow overhead, the light it emitted increased the brightness of the room significantly. Given that they were in a maze, it couldn't be the real sun, but the heat it generated could easily cause such a misapprehension.

"... Hajime. The surroundings."

As Hajime was looking up at the false sun with a grim face, Yue urged him to be careful. Accordingly, Hajime took his eyes off of the false sun, only to see something quite strange.

All the surroundings were glittering. The light coming through the spray of snow overhead was reflected on the ice crystals in the air. This phenomenon had a name: diamond dust.

However, compared to natural diamond dust, something was off. The glittering was obviously far too intense. It felt as though there were countless lamps floating in the air. Moreover, one part of the ice shard was shining increasingly bright moment by moment.

"... I smell something dangerous about this supposed diamond dust. Everyone, strengthen your defenses!"

To Hajime, these glittering ice shards were like small batteries that had saved up energy. He could tell because he used batteries to power his cross bits and send them flying. He issued a warning to the other members. They were stunned at the danger that presented itself before them and felt shivers down their spines.

It seemed like the analysis was correct.

They automatically regrouped. The moment Yue and Suzu cast 'Holy Interruption' there was a flash.

"Uh, it's like a high energy laser weapon."

As Hajime predicted, the countless ice shards floating in the room started unleashing the accumulated light as heat rays.

It seemed the thin, white rays weren't especially directed at Hajime's group but were scattering randomly, hitting both the ice walls and the

ground. A ‘Bi—’ sound was heard as the rays struck the ‘Holy Interruption’ cast by Yue and Suzu and slipped through.

The rays were apparently fired completely randomly. In addition, the ice shards were rotating and moving randomly, making the trajectory of the rays unpredictable. Every second, there were additional scars in the ground and the ice walls. It goes without saying that this process scattered even more ice shards into the air. It was a vicious circle.

To make matters worse, as if it had just been dropped by the false sun, the spray of snow overhead started descending towards Hajime’s party. At this rate, it would dramatically reduce their field of vision in a few seconds like in Haltina’s Sea of Trees.

“Tsk. It’d be a bother to be wrapped up in smoke. We’re running through in one go.”

“Nn... Suzu, get ready.”

“Y-yes, onee-sama!”

Following Hajime’s instruction, Yue addressed Suzu to sync their timing. They were waiting for the moment the heat rays would turn away from them. Then, the moment all the rays disconnected, they would turn ‘Holy Interruption’ into shields that could be deployed on the surroundings, mimicking the defensive ability of Hajime’s cross bits.

“Let’s go!”

After Hajime issued his order, they all simultaneously broke into a run. Meanwhile, the heat rays were mercilessly attacking the shields of ‘Holy Interruption’ and quickly shaving them off, but Yue and Suzu would repeatedly repair them each time, so it could be thought they would have no trouble reaching the gates which were only a hundred meters away.

However, or rather, maybe we should say as expected, it wouldn’t be that easy.

ZuDonn!!

With an earth tremor from the spray of snow that was approaching

from above, several lumps of ice, each the size of a car, came falling down. They looked fairly heavy and broke the ground from the impact and left craters. The big ice lumps were so transparent that the other side could be seen. Maybe they were what they call 'pure ice'. In the heart of those ice lumps were dark red crystals. Their purpose was easy to guess.

"Tsk. My favorite." Hajime clicked his tongue.

As if acting accordingly, the shape of the lumps of ice immediately changed and turned into human-like forms of five meter in length. They held a halberd in one hand, and a tower shield in the other. They totaled nine. Exactly like the number of people in Hajime's party. Short and stout, just like golems, they lined up to block the exit.

"Let's scatter them."

The group nodded at Hajime's order and simultaneously entered combat mode to break through in one go.

Hajime started a pre-emptive attack with Donner and Schlag. The revolvers roared several times, sending high-power bullets aimed at the enemy's hearts.

However, the tower shields the frost golems were holding were unexpectedly solid, and even though they were smashed into small pieces after receiving the bullets, they managed to protect the golems, even if just barely. To withstand Donner and Schlag's attacks after their specs had been increased... It seems these golems had the best stamina among the monsters they had fought so far.

"But, there's no problem."

"It's as you say!"

"Let's scatter them away!"

Hajime muttered as he spun his gun and reloaded. Shia and Tio confirmed his statement and respectively fired explosive slug bullets and dragon breath. Simultaneously, the other members unleashed their skills, except for Yue and Suzu who were focusing on defense.

Kouki used ‘Soaring Blade Quake’, Kaori used ‘Decomposition Bombardment’, Shizuku flew and slashed and Ryuutaro used ‘Shock Wave’ —— at each other.

“Uh!?”

“Eh?”

The shining slash Kouki unleashed directly made its way towards Hajime. Judging from Kouki’s slanted position behind Hajime, and the frost golems he was aiming at, there was no way he could have mistakenly slashed at Hajime.

(EN: This is where bakapervert’s translation takes over.)

The way Kouki was moving and the dumbfounded expression on his face as if he couldn’t understand why spoke more eloquently than anything about how unforeseen the situation was.

At the same time as that, Kaori’s silver bombardment which carried her disintegration ability went at Yue, Shizuku’s slash went to Shia, Ryuutaro’s shockwave was approaching Hajime similar to Kouki.

Without delay, Hajime jumped out of the way without losing a breath, catching and evading Kouki’s attack while his crimson magic power clashed with Ryuutaro’s shockwave, neutralizing the attack as Hajime escaped from the danger. Yue also twisted the trajectory of the silver bombardment using the satellite of ‘Calamity Sky’, while Shia was rotating and sweeping away Shizuku’s slash using Doryuken.

“... What are you planning?”

“... Kaori, that’s some nerve.”

“Shi, Shizuku-san? Ha-have I hurt your feelings?”

The frost golem approached with a tremor on the ground and the spray of snow was already descending until a few meters over their head. There was no free time to be wasted, but as expected there was no way they could just leave alone the strange action of Kouki and others as merely a joke. Hajime and the others who received the attack were directing their

gazes at the unexpected attackers.

Kouki and others who were perplexed at their own deed returned to their senses and showed fierce unrest at the same time.

“Yo-you are wrong! I, didn’t intend anything like that… but when I noticed… I’m saying the truth-!”

“Ye-yeah, that’s right! I don’t have any intention to attack Nagumo-! Believe me!”

“Tha-that’s true! Truly when I noticed the attack was already heading at Yue… why do I… such a thing…”

“I’m sorry Shia! But, I also don’t understand why that happened. I planned to cut the enemy yet…”

Kouki and others made excuses desperately. It seemed that unconsciously their bodies moved mostly by themselves and their targets changed completely. Hajime frowned while he was checking the breath unleashed by the frost golems. Tio immediately spoke the conjecture he formed.

“Goshujin-sama. Just before they attacked, I felt like I heard the whispering voice, though… possibly.”

“Chih, you are saying that’s something like mind incitement?”

“I don’t know if that is all. Goshujin-sama. Yue, Shia, and I art not affected, don’t thou think that’s not a coincidence?”

“… Troublesome. It’s hard to cancel interference at the territory of the subconscious.”

If they were brainwashed by magic, it would suffice to heal them using regeneration magic or Kaori’s abnormal status recovery. However, until the end, this was a mind incitement. In addition, it was interference to the subconscious. As expected, even Yue would have a hard time dealing with such a thing. If it had to be said, the scientific factor here was stronger than the magical factor.

“Now that it has come to this, beating all of them up until just a step

before death is…”

Hajime’s look showed how troublesome he felt the situation was, his eyes narrowed dangerously while his gaze swept through Kouki, Ryuutaro, Shizuku, and Kaori in turn. He began to speak dangerous words. Kouki and the others took a step back, wanting to be spared from that because they weren’t an old television that could be fixed by getting hit. Cold sweat flowed down their cheeks.

While they were doing such things, the snow spray that covered the air above was coming to the ground.

“Geez-, in the end, what are we going to do?”

A crowd of Frost golem was pushing in from the front. There was a poor field of vision where it had become hard to even see the person at their side. On top of that, there were allies that might make friendly fire.

Suzu was defending against the laser attack with a desperate look that spoke roughly towards Hajime and others still in a standstill.

Inside the space where their field of vision was being closed second by second by the snow spray, at the moment where the figure of their comrades vanished, Hajime raised his voice.

“Everyone, attack without reservation and smash the golems!”

The mind incitement and the snow spray were the trials that the great labyrinth prepared. If everything was covered in mist blocking their vision, the possibility that their attack would be guided into ally was large. No, rather, if it was not like that then it wouldn’t be a trial. So nine out of ten while they couldn’t see each other only their attack would be aiming accurately at their ally.

Hajime said those words for exactly that reason. The people aimed at were Hajime, Yue, and Shia. He figured the friendly fire of the likes of Kouki and others just didn’t matter.

“Well, if the attack is guided at anybody else other than us… my condolences to them.”

He became unable to detect the presence of Yue and others, the whole surface of his sight became pure white, Hajime murmured to himself inside such space. They had decided by themselves to challenge the great labyrinth. It wouldn't do for them to completely rely on other people. They had to do something by themselves against something of only this level. After all, he had followed up somewhat for them until they arrived here already.

And at that time, several streaks of laser cut through the veil of the snow spray and approached narrowly. It seemed that the laser didn't damp down even inside this snow spray. He couldn't see them coming until just before it hit, so the troublesomeness of the attack increased further.

However, Hajime's foot took a step back, his head tilted, and his body shifted slightly. He dodged everything just like that. For Hajime who was in a state where 'Light Speed' was activated, even if it was the bullet of his own railgun he could easily evade it with leisure if he caught sight of it within thirty centimeters from his body. To say nothing of the likes of the ultra-hot laser. It was easy to sense using 'Heat Source Detection' so there was no problem at all.

Right after Hajime evaded the laser,

GOU!! Such strong wind came along with an ice halberd that was nearly transparent which swung down at him. That too was easily evaded by lowering one of his legs which made only half his body visible. The attacker was of course a frost golem.

The frost golem struck at Hajime and the halberd which split the ground was swept horizontally using brute force in pursuit. The strong wind howled once more. The ice surface was smashed up explosively, ice fragments scattered toward the direction where the halberd was swung.

But, the figure of Hajime wasn't there anymore. The frost golem also stiffened for a moment after losing sight of Hajime's figure.

"You're a slow guy, just like you appear." That voice colder than the surrounding's temperature resounded from diagonally behind the frost

golem.

Ahead of the gaze of the frost golem that turned back in shock——at the tip of the halberd, he swung, Hajime's figure was there. Unnoticed, Hajime got on the head of the halberd with Schlagen readied, its muzzle aimed steadily at the golem's heart. The bursting sparks illuminated the colorless transparent frost golem crimson.

The frost golem wasted no time to swing around the halberd trying to drop Hajime, but he was already checkmated.

Therefore,

DOU-!!

Along with such a sound, the magic stone along with the frost golem's upper body were blown away and became splinters.

Hajime jumped back from the destroyed Frost golem. There, the snow spray was blown away as a shining slash flew at him. Following after that a shockwave also came flying from another direction.

"Whoops. As expected, I can be aimed at even inside this snow spray."

Hajime was evading laser while smiling wryly because the situation went as expected. The snow spray before his eyes began to whirl. Hajime narrowed his eyes at what was happening this time.

That whirl became a spiral that looked like a tornado and stretched in a straight line. Like an eye of a typhoon, there was not a single ice fragment inside the center of the spiral. It seemed that the laser was also not passing through there. And then, ahead of the spiral became the door that was their goal.

"... So there is a golem for each person. Mind incitement and laser storm. So this place is telling us to slip through those and defeat the golem, huh. Now then, I wonder if Amanogawa and the rest can clear this?"

Hajime who easily cleared the trial sent a glance at the direction from where the slash and shockwave came, then he shrugged and began to

walk calmly toward the goal through the tunnel of snow spray.

"Again-"

Without even any time to be conscious of the swearing that leaked out reflexively, Shizuku desperately dodged the approaching colorless and transparent halberd along with the strong wind.

She let fly a slash to the direction beyond. Because her posture crumbled and her opening was prodded, she was unable to dodge satisfactorily. A cutting sound could be heard, several strands of front hair were torn off while cold flecks of condensation coming out from the passing brutal blade.

Shizuku collapsed from her back while making use of that momentum to somehow stand back up. She then grandly heaved out a breath she had been holding this whole time. It was as though that breathing was read. This time, countless heat rays were approaching from all directions to bisect her.

"Kuh."

If she was touched it would be an instant death. She leaped backward to evade the heat ray while feeling a high temperature on her back and over her head.

Shizuku got through the line of death in a hairbreadth with acrobatic movements. This time, a wall was approaching while not giving her time to catch her breath. That was the tower shield of the frost golem that charged ahead without caring for the lasers that were running in all directions at the surroundings. The transparent ice shield with a thickness that reached thirty centimeters looked like a wall from this close.

The body blow using the shield that came almost at the same time with her landing was already impossible to dodge. And then, the might of the attack was tremendous with the mass of the frost golem.

"Guuuuuuuh!!"

Wasting no time, Shizuku somehow softened the momentary impact of

the charge by leaping behind, but as expected, the impact assaulting her whole body caused her to leak out an anguished voice unintentionally.

Even so, she obstinately drew out her black katana even while being blown away from fear of whether she was going to be pursued or not.

“Cut apart, ‘Soaring Claw’!”

However, the flying out invisible blade veered off greatly to the right, contrary to Shizuku’s intention. That was only natural. That was because her body moved subconsciously and her arm swing aimed at the beyond. Surely there was someone who was supposed to be ahead of that slash.

Shizuku who struck the ground while gritting her teeth wondering whether she had attacked her ally once again stood up desperately even while her breathing got caught up. And then she determined herself that in this battle, long range technique shouldn’t be used as expected.

Hajime said to them to fight without reservation, but even before that the opening after her technique veered off was too large. Misusing techniques in a battlefield where life and death was decided in milliseconds was fatal.

Besides, indeed if it was Hajime and others then they would surely deal with the attack coming at them easily, but the fact that she was attacking her ally would return damage mentally to herself.

There was also the matter that her misfire was a bother to others, and most of all, just what did her attack suggest...

——Actually I’m jealous

She couldn’t help but be conscious of that.

“Gofuh, shu-shut up-!”

She coughed violently and slightly spit out blood. It seemed that she had internal damage. She convinced herself that drawn out battle was dangerous while wiping the blood with her hand. Then in Shizuku’s ears, the whispering voice resounded once more. She involuntarily raised an angry voice that exposed her irritation.

——Why is it only me?

“I told you to shut up already!”

The frost golem approached with a tremor through the ground. Even while buying distance with a back step, her billowing heart didn’t settle down. For an instant, at the moment when her attention was divided, a laser ran through as though aiming for that timing. It shallowly tore Shizuku’s shoulder.

At the corner of the gaze of Shizuku who came back to her senses from the pain, a heat ray from below that was scooping up was visibly approaching. Rather than an attack from the front with a pinpoint aim, this one was a sweeping horizontal attack. At this rate, Shizuku’s torso would be bisected into two.

With the impact on her shoulder, her balance crumbled, and she was unable to dodge, Shizuku immediately put the black katana between the heat ray and her body. With the blade of her black katana, even if it was Shizuku’s slender waist there was no possible way the blade could be a cover for her. ‘I just need to prevent lethal wound!’ Shizuku held such praying feeling, but at that point, it was as expected from Hajime’s artifact.

Shizuku herself didn’t intend for it by any means, but the blade of the black katana that was held with a subtle angle, regardless of its jet black color that seemed to suck in light, because it was polished to the extreme in pursuit of sharpness it somehow reflected the laser.

“He?”

Shizuku who escaped her predicament with unexpected method reflexively leaked out such a stupid voice.

There the frost golem was brandishing its halberd while charging forward. Shizuku returned to her senses with a ‘hah’ while bracing herself back, she stepped into the blind spot that was the side of the tower shield to evade while releasing powerful slash while passing over the golem.

“Sever apart, ‘Flash Blossom’!!”

The space severance that was launched at the two’s crossing splendidly severed the shield of the frost golem together with the arm holding it.

Lasers were rushing once more at Shizuku who was in continued alertness after passing through. But, Shizuku wasn’t flustered anymore.

“Assemble, ‘Drawn Sky’!”

The blade of the black katana that was lifted right overhead twisted the trajectories of the lasers or pulled them closer to the middle, drawing an unnatural line. And then the moment those lasers touched the blade, they were splendidly reflected, rushing into the frost golem that was right behind Shizuku trying to regenerate its arm.

As expected, it appeared the golem couldn’t ignore getting hit by the focused laser from the front, the Frost golem lifted its halberd in place of the tower shield it lost, trying to escape from the threat of the laser that became two sizes thicker.

But Shizuku didn’t permit it to do something like that. Even while continuing to reflect the laser, she corrected her stance so that the black katana was horizontal, and it went right into the sheath. And then she faced the Frost golem that couldn’t move from the focused laser and stepped forward with a breath.

“Break, ‘Scorch Wave’!!”

The thrust of the sheath spread ripples of dark blue color while at the next instant, a fierce impact was created. The place hit slipped through the defense of the halberd and gouged the golem’s chest.

‘Bishiri-!’ The transparent ice had a large crack in it.

“Fly, ‘Far Sky’! Demolish, ‘Heavy Flash’!!”

In a flash, Shizuku flicked off the converged laser and mowed below the golem with a streak of the black katana.

‘Heavy Flash’——it was an ability that cut apart the lynchpin of gravity itself and for a few seconds created a state of weightlessness.

Just as she aimed, the large body of frost golem that still had the sheath stabbed in it lightly floated.

“——!?”

“-aAAA!!”

The limbs of the frost golem flapped around from experiencing a completely unexpected situation while raising a soundless scream. During that time, Shizuku raised a spirited yell while using her sheath as the fulcrum to lift the Frost golem and crash it into the ground on her opposite side in one motion.

The appearance of a slender girl swinging around a five-meter giant looked unreal. The gravity cut by ‘Heavy Flash’ affected only the slashed coordinate, so after the golem was lifted to the opposite side it recovered its weight and free fell.

Therefore the frost golem was struck on its back with quite an impact, in the end, the sheath that was still stabbing in its body slid in even further. It was to the degree that the tip of the sheath arrived at its magic stone.

“This is the end, ‘Scorch Wave’!!”

Even while breathing hard, Shizuku proclaimed the checkmate, granting the last impact for the enemy.

‘Barin’, such a sound was raised and the magic stone broke. The frost golem’s shape crumbled.

“Haa haa… doing this myself is still just barely… isn’t it?”

While supporting her body using the sheath, Shizuku floated a self-depreciating smile. She was able to defeat a monster of the great labyrinth under strict requirements, so there was no need to be that self-depreciating but……

At the other side of the tunnel of snow spray created before her eyes, Hajime, Yue, Shia, Tio, and Kaori were already there… she couldn’t say anything.

Shizuku compared herself with Kaori who was rushing toward her with a worried look and smiled wryly while sheathing her black katana. The pleasant sound ‘clink’ it made was like the sound of a clapped hand in prayer at the shrine. It cleared the dark cloud in her heart just for a bit.

“... Doing this myself... that’s also not quite true I guess?”

Looking at the black katana grasped in her hand, Shizuku muttered to herself like that. She was able to escape her predicament undoubtedly thanks to the present from he who was recently making her heart astir excessively.

For some reason, really for so...me reason Shizuku kissed the black katana. Till the end it was the expression of her thanks for her partner. By no means was she imagining a certain someone at the other side of the black katana. By no means!

Even so, perhaps growing embarrassed at her own act, Shizuku’s cheeks faintly reddened and with fast gait she began to walk inside the tunnel while praying so that her burning face wouldn’t be exposed to her approaching best friend.

Chapter 142 : One More Self

*

"Fuu, thank you, Kaori. I'm fine already now."

"I'm glad... You have a lot of injuries, it made me recall that time that I got flustered."

They had reached the final destination of the great labyrinth. After she finished healing Shizuku who was sitting down and leaning her back on the wall in front of that huge door, Kaori breathed out in relieve.

'That time' that Kaori mentioned was about the time when they were reunited with Hajime at [Orcus Great Labyrinth]. Shizuku tried to cut through the enemy line alone and became worn-out. They clung to each other with the determination to die when she recalled that unconsciously it drove her with uneasiness.

"Compared to that time this is far better right? At the very least I didn't get one of my arms broken. Just this much injury is just a minor thing, minor."

Shizuku tapped 'pon pon' on her arm that was previously broken while saying a manly thing to the teary-eyed Kaori. Something like 'call it a heavy wound when you get your arm done in!' wasn't something a normal high school girl could say.

"Sheesh, Shizuku-chan you really..."

Kaori floated a troubled smile to Shizuku who was being like that. Since the olden days, even when she was injured in kendo or sword practice, she was a girl that wouldn't even complain that it hurt. She would pretend to show endurance even while being teary-eyed. Rather than calling that obstinate, Kaori knew that a large part of that was so that Shizuku wouldn't make other people worry.

For that reason, she got worried for Shizuku who wouldn't whine or act spoiled. But at the same time, she also knew that if she continued to worry for her, Shizuku would only grin brightly while saying "It's fine!" So

Kaori couldn't say anything.

And so, Kaori stayed quiet and only devoted herself to healing while snuggling up to Shizuku. Her body was healed, but the whispering voice that had tormented her mind didn't change. The balance of the mind could be more or less stabilized by soul magic, so Kaori embraced Shizuku's body while wrapping it up with light.

From a slightly distanced place, Hajime was standing still while staring at that scene. He looked admiring, or perhaps with an amused look. This was the kind of expression he was making.

"... What?"

"No, nothing? I'm just thinking, you two really have a good relationship, huh? That's all."

Shizuku acted threateningly to the grinning Hajime, but Hajime easily replied with a shoulder shrug.

"Hmm. Truly a beautiful friendship."

"Isn't that righttt-"

"... Just like lovers."

Tio and Shia directed warm gaze at the two. But, only Yue floated a teasing smile at the corner of her mouth like Hajime and said something like that. Naturally, Kaori objected vehemently.

"Yueee! You are saying mean thing again!"

"... I don't have a prejudice against relationships between fellow girls. May everlasting happiness be with you."

"I told you! Don't say anything weird!"

Because Kaori got irritated and talked back, the 'S' part inside Yue got agitated, but Kaori still hadn't noticed that. Looking at an appearance that suggested Kaori wouldn't separate from Shizuku even while complaining, it seemed like you could see an illusion of lilies blooming on their backs, yet the person herself was unaware.

Yue and Kaori began to quarrel like that. Shizuku, who was between the two of them, knitted her eyebrows in awkwardness and tried to mediate, but there was no significant result.

“Hey, Nagumo-kun. Don’t just smile, stop them.”

“Hm? It’s fine, isn’t it? It’s free time until Amenogawa and others return, anyway. Rather than that, how about saying ‘Stop! Don’t get into a fight because of me!’ Give that a try!”

“... What kind of indecisive woman do you think I am.”

Hajime chuckled ‘ku ku’ toward Shizuku who was glaring at him testily. Hajime stopped chuckling then and opened his mouth toward Shizuku, who was frowning even more in displeasure after seeing him enjoy this.

“Yaegashi, you, it’s better if you act a little more relaxed.”

“Yes?”

“I’m saying that you are too serious. Even now your mind got burdened by the whispering, right? Then, at this kind of time, it’s better if you make racket together with them and refresh yourself. After all, there is nobody here that you need to look after.”

“...”

Hajime’s words made Shizuku opened her eyes wide. For some reason that even Shizuku didn’t understand, she felt like her heartstring was stirred by that. It was though she heard words that were the opposite of the whispering voice...

Without really being concerned about Shizuku falling quiet, Hajime’s mouth distorted into a mean grin.

“If you like, how about I lend you Shia’s rabbit ears so that you can relax? Oh, Shizuku-chan who loves cute thing?”

“-, shut up! No thanks-! Rather stop your grinning!”

Shizuku objected with a voice that expressed her full displeasure while her cheeks reddened like an apple. But in the end, were her cheeks reddened because she was made fun of, or was it because she was

suddenly called by her first name...

Shizuku's reaction made Hajime float a mean grin that was exactly the same with Yue when she was making fun of Kaori at the side. Perhaps realizing that it was pointless no matter what she said, Shizuku looked aside angrily with a huff.

And then from both sides, two gazes were stabbing at Shizuku who was displaying such a reaction that was cute in this certain situation. It was Yue and Kaori who stopped quarreling before anyone realized. Those two were 'jii—, staring unmovingly at Shizuku.

"Wha, what?"

"... Shizuku-chan got red. You are cuter more than usual."

"... Nn. You are delighted being bullied by Hajime."

"Wai-, I'm not delighted, and I'm not being cute at all! You two don't make fun of me!"

Shizuku herself complained while thinking that the two of them were ridiculing her, but as for Yue and Kaori, they were directing gazes filled with staggeringly deep suspicion at Shizuku. They had felt this since before but, it felt like it was gradually becoming stronger since they started traveling together from the royal capital.

"... It increased again?"

"Uu, thinking about the current situation, it feels like it's too late to object even if it increases by one more person after this far... besides if it's Shizuku-chan then rather..."

For an instant, Kaori and Yue's faces met each other, and it felt like they were expressing their respective thoughts and discussing something that was hard to ignore in regard to themselves. Shizuku was about to open her mouth unconsciously, at that time...

GOU!!

An intense torrent of magic power heaved up a spray of snow and thrust into the sky. Right after that, the bombardment of light that contained

tremendous strength was blown away and the snow pushed forward straight at Hajime.

Hajime didn't really show any surprise and took out a metallic piece, the gate key, from his breast pocket before thrusting and twisting it at the space in front of him. Right after, a teleport gate opened in front of his eyes.

There, the torrent of light surged in while gouging away the ground. And then it flew out from the exit gate that was opened with the keyhole model artifact 'Gate Hole' put beside Hajime as the reference point. Like that the light flew beyond the horizon.

"Kouki!"

"That Amenogawa, he used 'Limit Break'... quite impatient is he."

Shizuku who guessed that just now was the chant-omitted version of 'Divine Might' stood up reflexively. Hajime too, it was already not visible due to snow blocking the way, but he was directing his gaze at the spot where the blow came from and murmured.

It was a self-evident truth that Kouki and Ryuutaro were having their consciousness incited so their attacks were aimed at Hajime. And so he made preparation to evade them using the reliable gate rather than defending. It seemed that, as expected, it was the correct decision.

There was no other attack coming at them even once while they were talking until now. Most likely that was because Kouki and others feared friendly fire and didn't use anything except close range skills. But it seemed just now Kouki got cornered into a desperate situation and attempted to break the deadlock. Right about this time, his face was surely going pale because his attack flew in the wrong direction.

"Now then, as expected, Amenogawa who used 'Limit Break' will clear this after a few minutes. The problem is the other two, though..."

"Eh? I... is Kouki okay I wonder?"

Looking at Hajime easily averting his gaze, Shizuku called out with a worried expression. Her gaze kept taking a glance at the direction where

Kouki seemed to be. She looked like she was going to rush there for support, even now.

Toward such a Shizuku who in a certain meaning could be said to be overprotective, Hajime sent her an exasperated face while adding his words.

"That guy still has the derivative skill of 'Limit Break' right? Then, there is still leeway until he is forced to use that. Besides, the clear condition of this great labyrinth is perhaps for one person to defeat one golem you know? Even if you help him right now, for him, it's not something desirable."

"That's... perhaps that's true."

"Haa, that's why Yaegashi is too meddlesome. Because of that, you are also called something like 'mom'."

"Just who is this mom? The one saying that is just Nagumo-kun! Really, that's rude!"

For now, Shizuku went angry with her continuing words while consenting to what Hajime said. Hajime easily ignored her and this time he took out a compass from his breast pocket. What he wished for was 'the whereabouts of Taniguchi Suzu'.

"... That way."

"Hajime-kun. Ryuutaro-kun and Suzu-chan are..."

"Wait, I'm checking right now. Rather than the attacker Sakagami, I think the defensive Taniguchi is more in a deadlock..."

Saying that, Hajime let fly a crossbit following the guide of the compass. Crossbit's 'distant penetration stone' vanished inside the snow and as expected, only projected the color of snow. But after a while, a faint radiance began to be visible on the other side of that veil.

The crossbit that reached Suzu's location climbed up and probed the situation from an overlooking view. Thereupon, it seemed that both sides of Suzu and the frost golem were surrounded by 'Holy Severance'.

The lasers mowing down from all directions were blocked by normal 'Holy Severance' while it seemed the frost golem was being melted by an inside barrier that was turned into high-temperature space using 'Holy Severance–Blaze' that was a combination of flame element magic and Holy Severance.

The frost golem's body had shrunk into a third of its original size. Even now, it was dripping with trickles of water. It charged ahead and struck with its halberd several times in the attempt to break the barrier that was sealing itself inside.

With several attacks, cracks entered 'Holy Severance—Blaze' and it was about to collapse, but each time Suzu repaired it so it appeared that it was unable to completely escape right after it attacked.

But it also could be said that there was no problem with Suzu's side who was continuously preserving the barrier.

"Uh, haa haa, just a little more... just a little more..."

Sweat trickled like a waterfall from her forehead. Her breathing was rough. Her eyes were turning blank. She was considerably exhausted by preserving and repairing the advanced barrier continuously. Her two opened iron fans were also trembling, even now it felt like they were going to fall from her hands.

Most likely the firepower was lacking with 'Holy Severance—Blaze'. The idea of melting the golem if she couldn't blow it away in one go, ignoring the bad environment of [Ice and Snow Cavern] that remarkably worsened magic power efficiency of fire element magic by surrounding it with a barrier, was something splendid for a barrier master who really understood her own skill.

What was left was the problem of Suzu's magic power and concentration power against the frost golem's endurance, which one could hold out longer...

"I won't lose. Haa haa, I absolutely won't lose! No matter what I'm told, Suzu will absolutely talk once more with Eriii!"

Right now she was surely hearing the whispering voice. She was rousing up her breaking heart with her war cry. Her blank eyes recovered their shine showing strong will once again. While roughly wiping her sweat with her sleeve, she fired herself up once more.

Looking at such spectacle, Hajime was convinced that if it was Suzu, she would be fine. Surely the experience at Haltina's Great Labyrinth made Suzu a level stronger.

Next, Hajime searched for Ryuutaro's location using the compass. And then he launched the crossbit at the direction it showed. After advancing for a while ahead, it discovered a spot where snow was fiercely blowing in all directions.

In the eyes of Hajime who was watching from the overhead viewpoint in the sky once again, a fiercely mind blowing spectacle flew into his eyes.

"UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOH!!"

"GAAAAAAAAAAH!!"

They were punching each other earnestly from close range without stopping for even a single step back while raising war cries. For some reason, the frost golem didn't carry its halberd and tower shield, if its left cheek got punched, then it would punch the left cheek back. If its right cheek got punched, then it would punch the right cheek back. That kept being repeated back and forth.

It was like two delinquents hitting each other at the riverside. 'Surely a friendship would bud between the frost golem and the muscle head after this, wouldn't it?' That was what Hajime thought with his eyes half-closed. If not for the wounds all over Ryuutaro's body due to the laser and the frost golem's attacks, perhaps he would seriously consider such a possibility to happen.

Rather, think a little about dodging! That was what Hajime couldn't help to retort. Most likely Ryuutaro was thinking, 'Evading the laser while defeating the frost golem is impossible!' right from the start and gave up. 'If that's the case, I just need to defeat it before I get defeated!' must be what he thought then.

“An idiot, an idiot is right here...”

While controlling the crossbit, Hajime couldn’t hold back and murmured so.

Hajime explained the situation to Kaori and the others while they looked at him dubiously. Although they looked admiring toward Suzu’s current state, the two childhood friends as well as everyone else made an exasperated face towards Ryuutaro’s state. Especially Shizuku, who got a headache. She was massaging her forehead due to that.

“Looks like the frost golem is near its limit, so I guess with Sakagami’s momentum he will make it somehow... well, Kaori, that’s your childhood friend. Do your best.”

“... Yes. Ryuutaro-kun too needs to be lectured.”

Kaori’s eyes weren’t smiling at all, which was really terrifying. Hajime didn’t think that a muscle head could be cured, but he had to be scolded strictly by all means.

A few minutes later, it seemed that Kouki defeated the frost golem first. He passed through the tunnel of snow veil while using his holy sword as a cane replacement due to the miserable weariness that was the side effect of ‘Limit Break’. Next, Suzu cleared her trial and a snow tunnel was opened. Same like Kouki, Suzu was walking with staggering steps where Shizuku rushed to her in a hurry.

And then, Ryuutaro who defeated the frost golem last... alone, he passed out and sunk into his puddle of blood with a satisfied face. He didn’t enter the snow tunnel, so the laser was approaching at him mercilessly.

“Wawa-, Ryuutaro-kun!”

Kaori rushed out in a great panic. Hajime heaved a deep sigh while covering the crossbit lying in wait with ‘Vajra’, blocking that laser. Looking at Ryuutaro’s carefree fainted face, a light killing intent welled up from him. Just when he was aiming his gun muzzle while half seriously thinking whether he should just blow his face with a shotgun like this, Kaori reached Ryuutaro first and Hajime barely gave up his

thinking.

Kaori grabbed Ryuutaro's leg and dragged him while dashing through the tunnel. It seemed she was applying healing simultaneously while advancing, but the back of Ryuutaro's head bumped gon gon with the ground and kept tumbling. Honestly, that treatment was just terrible.

Perhaps because all the members had passed through the snow veil and gathered in front of the gate, the sun shining over their head suddenly vanished. At the same time the laser stopped and the snow veil once more rose in to the sky and the field of vision cleared up. And then the gigantic gate that should become the entrance shined brilliantly as though informing them of clearing the trial. It didn't open, but began to form a membrane of light.

"Looks like, this membrane of light is turning into the entrance."

"... It resembled a gate. A teleport entrance?"

"I don't really feel a good feeling."

"Shia. There is no way a trial in a great labyrinth will give a good feeling, right?"

"Ahaha. Certainly. The mind attack is not really a problem, but there is nothing more irritating than this. Ao I want to be spared from anything more than this, though... surely, my wish won't get granted isn't it... haah."

Shia's rabbit ears dropped down gloomily. If it was a physical attack, it wouldn't be a threat for Shia who had been remarkably turned into a bugged character, but a mental attack that bit by bit interfered with the subconscious territory felt irritating like a small bone that got stuck in the throat even though it wouldn't kill you. It was steadily getting under her skin.

By the way as for Tio... it was fine to not pay her any mind.

"Kouki-kun and Suzu-chan too, gather over here! I will heal you two all at once."

Kaori called at Kouki and Suzu who reached in front of the entrance with staggered steps just sat down heavily as though expressing their extreme fatigue. The figure of Kouki that was crawling to her wordlessly was quite eerie. As for Suzu, for some reason, Shizuku carried her in a princess carry that made her shy.

"... Nagumo... my attack was... my bad."

Kouki murmured intermittently with a dark atmosphere while being wrapped in light of healing.

"I told you already you don't need to feel reserved. Even though it would be better if you just go all out from the start if that was too much trouble for you."

"... I guess. Even though my 'Divine Might' should have come at you, there is not a single speck of dust on you. No matter what I do, I cannot even give you a scratch. That's why I..."

"Kouki, are you okay? You feel strange for some reason. Is the side effect of the 'Limit Break' that hard on you? Want to lie down a little?"

"..."

With a dark look, Kouki spilled out self-derisive words toward Hajime who was not only unharmed but even looked spotless without any trace of fatigue. Shizuku addressed such a Kouki with a worried tone. She would even lend him her lap if he wanted to lie down. She was tapping her lap to show that.

However, Kouki himself only glanced at such a Shizuku with a scared look for an instant before he averted his gaze immediately. He shook his head conveying his anxiety. After that, he closed his eyes. But just before his eyes closed, the gaze that he sent at Hajime... it was only Hajime who noticed the hatred which dyed that gaze, but that was just his feeling...

"What a troublesome concept..."

Hajime unconsciously floated a wry smile.

A while after that, the healing of every member was finished to a

certain degree, so they headed toward the entrance of light. They couldn't wait for full recovery, but even so compared to having their mind continuously eroded by the whispering voice inside this labyrinth, they decided it was better to progress.

"Now then, let's go."

Along with Hajime's words, all members leaped into the gate of light.

When the brightness that dyed their field of vision settled, Hajime slowly opened his eyes.

"... So we got divided. Well, it's within expectation."

Hajime whispered while scowling with an air as though he was going to click his tongue at any moment. None of his companions were around him. He was alone.

When his gaze wandered around, it looked like Hajime was in a narrow passage. Inside that two-meter passage were more mirrors in four directions like a mirror house. His figure was reflected at his left and right up and down. Even when he turned to look back there was only a wall. There was not a single thing that seemed to be an entrance. It was a place where he could only advance forward.

Most likely, Yue and others were also sent to a similar passage like this by themselves alone. Hajime advanced ahead with that assumption.

The sound of his footsteps walking on the mirror-like ice reverberated.

It was perhaps after around ten minutes of walking. He walked without stopping on a straight path without any branching. Before long, Hajime arrived at a large room with a huge pillar that connected the ceiling and the floor in the center. Similar to the mirror-like ice wall, the round ice pillar also reflected Hajime nicely.

"There is no other passage... that means, that ice pillar is..."

While talking to himself like that, Hajime walked closer toward the ice pillar. Its diameter was large, so Hajime's reflection on it wasn't distorted even when he was right in front of it, it was like one more Hajime had

come from the world inside the mirror. The more Hajime approached, the larger the figure got.

Finally, Hajime approached to the distance where he could touch the ice pillar. He looked fixedly at his image reflected in the ice pillar. White hair and eye patch, wearing a black coat with one artificial hand... as always, it was a splendid chuunibyou style. Hajime fell on his knees.

"... Damn it. Recently I have never looked at mirror clearly so... what a shock..."

Hajime was on all fours with his head hanging down. Actually, he didn't really look at the mirror on a routine basis, so he received quite some damage from looking at his own appearance thoroughly after so long. The black history sealed at the bottom of his heart "You calling?" peeked out its face. By the way, things like his bed hair or the like were handled by Yue every time. It seemed that she liked to tamper with Hajime.

"Indeed, this is just like what the whispering voice was saying, perhaps there is no place to belong for me in Japan..."

Surely what the whispering voice wanted to say wasn't something like that. This was a terrible misunderstanding. (EN: The voice was saying he could never return to Japan because his strength and magic made him barely human, while he personally is bothered more by the fact he looks chuunibyou.)

As though to express that, suddenly, a voice that he was already familiar with resounded.

{That's not what it means you know?}

"... As expected it comes out, huh."

Hajime's eyes quietly squinted, and he raised his head from his 'orz' posture. Thereupon, he caught the figure of himself in front of him glaring down.

Correct, regardless of Hajime's 'orz' posture, the Hajime that was reflected in the ice pillar was standing.

{Hou, as expected, you are not agitated, eh? I am just as expected?}

"Yeah, of course, isn't it? I have mostly guessed the concept of this great labyrinth. On top of that, if I take Amanogawa's testimony into account, I thought that sooner or later this kind of situation will come up."

Looking at Hajime, whose agitation was nonexistence even though the one inside the mirror was talking to him, the Hajime inside the mirror made a wide smirk.

{By the way, what's this concept?}

"You are me, right? Then, you should understand even without asking."

{No no, certainly I am you, but not entirely. You have also predicted that, right?}

Hajime nodded "Indeed". In his assumption, the Hajime inside the mirror was something similar like to the fake created in Haltina's Great Labyrinth, so he thought that this was something prepared by reading the information of the real thing to make this look-alike, and it seemed that this assumption was correct.

What the fake was saying by 'not entirely' was that until the end, the Hajime inside the ice pillar was a trial of the great labyrinth. Then it was understandable that it was trying to verify his answer.

"... The concept of this labyrinth is 'to win against yourself' right? The negative part of oneself, the dirty part that you averted your eyes from, the inconvenient part, contradiction... can you overcome that kind of thing or not? Most likely, this is a trial so we won't be taken advantage of by god, I guess."

{As expected of me. That's right, it's exactly as you said.}

The Hajime inside the mirror clapped his hands in a fake gesture. In regard to that, Hajime got irritated thinking 'What an irritating face'. It was a complete boomerang for him.

But that irritating face changed at the same time the clapping stopped. Those eyes began to emit reddish black light, the fake's whole body began

to be dyed with black that was blacker than even black. The white hair returned to his original black color, the skin that was tanned under the sun became even darker. Even the colors of the clothes were all changing into a jet black tone. Its whole body was really pitch black.

Hajime was about to take a step back full of vigilance to create some distance, and it was at that moment...

DOPAN-!

DOPAN-!

Without showing the hand movement, there wasn't even killing intent. With an extremely natural motion, shots were fired.

At the same time when the black haired Hajime pulled the trigger of a completely black Donner, a bullet really flew out from inside the mirror. The railgun emitted a muddy black spark. What intercepted it was a vivid red flash.

Hajime was taking a 'drawing back' action with a single step back while he was commencing a merciless attack. The bullet fired with an extremely natural motion clashed with the fast approaching black flash like some kind of joke, both crushed each other and fell on the ground.

It was something terrifying for an actual attack to come out from inside the mirror, but even more than that, what was the most terrifying was how both of them naturally fired lethal attacks without killing intent.

{Haha, as expected you get it. What's the timing, how do I think, what kind of technique would you use to slaughter the enemy..."

The black Hajime stepped out from the mirror world while smirking widely. He materialized into the real world smoothly from the rippling ice pillar. And then he drew out Schlag with left artificial arm similar to Hajime's and took a stance along with Donner at the right hand. That was exactly the stance of Hajime's self-taught gun-kata.

Hajime silently took the same stance. The white-haired Hajime and the black-haired Hajime began to emit absurd killing intent in the same stance like mirror reflections. That immense pressure was really equal. It

seemed that Hajime's ability and the weapons in his possession, everything was reproduced.

If it was normal people, just by being at the side of the two of them might make someone go mad, inside such pressure the black Hajime grinned while announcing the signal of the trial's start.

{Now, Nagumo Hajime. Can you, win against me?}

Right after that, there was a sublime tremendous roar as though space itself was creaking.

That was simply the sound of the two stepping in as well as the sound of a simultaneous bombardment from the crossbits they took out at the same time, and the explosive sound of the spinning kick they each launched while pretending to shoot.

Hajime's body, which was almost blown away immediately, forcefully stopped in place using the spike transmuted on the sole of his shoe and he aimed Donner. That gun muzzle made a blunt sound of metal striking metal... when he looked, the black Hajime also aimed Donner with exactly the same motion. Both of the gun muzzles locked each other without even a millimeter of disorder.

"Die."

{Die.}

Without hesitation, both of them pulled the trigger of Donner while ordering the other to die. Violent sound roared, each Donner repelled each other with fierce momentum. But, in the next instant both Schlags that had been prepared through their armpit spouted fire.

The red flash that was launched from super close range clashed from the front right at the middle of the two. Both bullets were squashed against each other and generated shockwave. Before the two crushed bullets fell on the ground, the two Hajime used that shockwave and rotated their body to launch an upper kick along with strong wind.

GAN-! A shockwave sound that was like a joke that couldn't be thought of coming from the clash of flesh bodies. Immediately after, the kick

changed the angle and deftly changed into a middle kick.

Once again, the shockwave of clashing metal resounded. At that moment, Hajime's Donner aimed at the head of the black Hajime and the trigger was pulled. The black Hajime warded off Hajime's Donner the instant the trigger was pulled and at the same time the black Schlag aimed at Hajime's head and fired.

And as expected, Hajime averted the line of fire using the barrel of Schlag to ward off the opponent's hand. Without paying any mind to the black flash that grazed his head, Hajime pulled back Donner that fired first and then fired consecutively at the black Hajime to arrest his movement, but that too was averted by the black Hajime's elbow strike.

While dodging the firing line of the opponent with the paper thin difference in close range, they tried to take the instant opening. Black and red flashes couldn't catch the opponent and passed through empty air. Even the attack from blind spots through the crossbit was neutralized by the black crossbit and resulted in nothing.

{How strong. Really strong. It's really not a strength that a human can have. Right, me?}

"Aaa?"

From two Donner that were swung in pretension of shooting, 'Wind Claw' stretched out and shallowly cut the cheek of each other. From the gap of the fresh blood scattering once more, the grinning face of the black Hajime peeked out.

{Monstrous power, hands dirtied in blood, heart that doesn't hesitate in killing... what are my parents going to think to look at the current you?}

"... What do you want to say?"

Reloading while performing a gun spin, Hajime tried to break the foothold with 'Transmutation' until the time to fire the next shot. At the same time the red spark traveled the ground, black spark ran and blocked the 'Transmutation' as though it was understood from the beginning.

{I want to go back home. That is the wish in my core of being but... are

you thinking that there is a place for you to belong there?}

"..."

{In that world, especially in the country called Japan, killing people is not tolerated yeah? To say nothing of monster, just who can accept someone like that? Tou-san and Kaa-san? Just when they think that their son who was missing is finally coming home, that son has turned into a man-killing monster. Ku-ku-ku-, surely they will be shocked. 'Is this really our son?' They are going to think like that.}

Hajime who kept silent and expressionless took out a large amount of grenades from his 'Treasure Warehouse', he ignited them using the spark of 'Lightning Clad' and scattered it on the ground. Against the suicide attack, the black Hajime grinned and invoked the same 'Vajra' like Hajime.

Right after that, a tremendous explosion occurred between the two from super close range. From inside the explosion flame BOBA-! Hajime and black Hajime flew out with such a sound. At the same time, both of them took out Orkan and fired all twelve bullets. Although the trajectory of the bullet was straight, the rocket bullet that had no relation with precise aiming, unlike the gun bullet, trailed sparks behind them attacking the target even while half their numbers were neutralizing each other.

Those surviving rockets were sniped by the railgun from both sides.

{Actually you are scared, right? The place for you to go home has been gone since a long time ago! That you will be absolutely rejected, in your original world, in your own family! You are scared right!?}

"Just keep talking."

Like a stage actor, the black Hajime talked vehemently with both his arms spread widely while still carrying Donner and Orkan. The real Hajime scowled and threw out a chakram.

{That's why you couldn't ignore the words of Hatayama Aiko. She pointed out your way of living after going home and put discord in your heart. You look up at Hatayama Aiko as your 'teacher' because she gave

you an answer, even if it's a trivial one for the doubt smoldering deep in your heart. Isn't that right!?}

"..."

The black Hajime similarly took out a chakram, and both artifacts clashed in midair, they neutralized each other really simply. Furthermore, just like Hajime, the black Hajime also shoot into the chakrams at hand and exchanged shot against the space-leap bullet from the opposite chakram flying in the air.

Continuing after that with a composed attitude, he continued his words that were making fun of Hajime.

"But, even if you are not living in 'a lonely way', it doesn't change the fact that you are a blood-soaked monster. Both that world and your family won't accept you! That time when your first killed a human, it wasn't that you didn't feel anything. Even if you didn't feel guilt, you felt fear. You just didn't realize that your feeling was paralyzed, from the depth of your heart, you fear being disconnected from the 'Nagumo Hajime your parents know'!"

Hajime frowned and his reaction was slightly late. The black flash flying out from chakram shallowly gouged Hajime's right shoulder. It was a small wound. It wasn't anything big. But since the battle started, this was the first time it was just Hajime who got wounded.

Looking at that, the black Hajime grinned widely. Without stopping, he continued to pull the trigger of words for follow up.

{It's great that there is Yue ehhh, me. As long as I just have Yue... saying that even if you rejected anything else you can just cling at her huh?}

The wound on Hajime's shoulder shined while it was healing little by little. That was the effect of the artifact Hajime made with regeneration magic set in it. It intermittently regenerated himself like auto-regen. It didn't have that much effect because in the end, the regeneration was attached into ore. The object that could be made to regenerate was also mainly ore in the end. Regeneration of the flesh was nothing more than a

secondary effect.

But the black Hajime didn't have the intention to allow even that slight regeneration. With fierce momentum, black Hajime stepped in close at Hajime and persistently aimed at the small earring that had regeneration magic concentrated so much on it that it had the effect to regenerate the flesh.

Once a more violent offense and the defense were unfolding in super close range.

{But, that is merely dependence. The majority of what you mistakenly think as love is just a sense of security. That's only insurance when you get rejected. Recently, your insurance is increasing eh!?}

The wish to return home, the love to Yue——the black Hajime mercilessly hacked the feeling that built the core of Hajime with a knife, while grinning triumphantly, the black Hajime was trying to expose every feeling of Hajime and throw it into a sea of malice.

But, those words became forcefully shut up by the red flash that grazed the cheek. Yes, that wound was inflicted only to the black Hajime. The black Hajime reflexively gazed in wonder, during that time Hajime slip through the distance and the elbow of the artificial arm of Hajime struck.

{Gofuh!?}

Immediately after, bursting slug bullet was fired from the elbow, the black Hajime has grandly blown away with scattered shockwave.

It was just like an elbow strike of Chinese kenpo, Hajime who was in continued alertness in that pose returned his stance and tapped Donner on his shoulder with a vein throbbing on his head.

"Although it can't be helped because this is a trial, but you talk too much in the middle of mortal combat. If you got the time to have a tedious talk, you better use it to think of a killing method even for just one more moment. You really are unlike me."

Implicitly Hajime was saying that 'after all you are just a fake', he was looking with a cold gaze.

Ahead of his gaze, was the figure of the black Hajime who was pressing on his stomach with a bewildered expression even while he was already standing up. He could block it to a certain degree with 'Vajra', but even so, he was hit with bursting slug bullet from zero distance. As expected he couldn't escape from it unharmed.

{I thought you got shaken but... My words are your heart. You should understand that I'm not talking randomly here.}

"I guess. Really those were words that made my ears hurt. Having the feeling deep inside myself exposed like that, is painful just like having a note where I wrote out my black history get read loudly."

Hajime's reaction that seemed like joking around made black Hajime frowned seeing that his words only gave that much damage mentally.

{Then, why... }

"That's obvious. I am aware of something like that myself even without anyone telling me."

{You are aware?}

"Yeah, that's right. Indeed, even while I'm wishing from the bottom of my heart to return home, I'm also scared to the same degree. That sensei's words became one of my salvation is correct, yet about those words aren't something that softened my fear is also true. And then, even when in the end it doesn't go like I want it, I have Yue... true, it's correct that I'm also thinking like that."

{Then, why aren't you shaken? Human is an organism that cannot look directly at one's own ugliness and dirty part. If those parts are exposed mercilessly, they will close their eyes so hard, plugged their ears, crouched down and stay unmoving there, even so, if they are made to face it forcefully they will break, that's the kind of organism they are.}

Hajime listened to the words of the black Hajime and leaked out a chuckle. He then settled his laugh seeing the black Hajime making a dubious face at him and shrugged his shoulder.

"The part where you're 'not entirely' me is coming out a lot, huh? That

way of talking is too serious as me you know?"

{... }

"Well, listen up. Why am I not shaken, you ask? That's because thinking of that kind of thing is meaningless, isn't that obvious?"

{Meaningless?}

"Certainly, there is the possibility I'll get rejected, that is something terrifying, but that's only something in the future, right? There won't be any answer even if I think about it right now. It's pointless just thinking about it. Then, I can only keep holding that fear and try to clash against it. You see, I already decided to go home. No matter what kind of circumstance anyone has, even if I myself am scared, I won't mind those trivial things and go home. I decided so, now I'll force my way through. That's all."

Calm eyes like a peaceful water surface. Hajime understood everything, yet he still declared that he would persist in his own will. Even though he was not using 'Coercion' or 'Magic Power Emission', for some reason it felt like he was emitting a pressure that was far more severe, the black Hajime unconsciously took a step back.

{... Isn't that just being defiant?}

"Haha, certainly you can say it like that. Yeah, but, I'll have you correct one thing."

While making a wry smile after being overpowered, the black Hajime talked back as though in revenge. Hajime too returned a wry smile. However, right after that, Hajime made a sullen face and demanded a correction of black Hajime's remark. Toward the black Hajime who was tilting his head, Hajime made a posture and strongly complained.

"It's not the majority. At best it's only 0.1 percent."

{What?}

"My feeling toward Yue that she is my insurance is just 0.1 percent from the whole. The rest 99.9 percent is love."

It was also correct that deep in Hajime's mind there was also a part of him that was thinking of Yue like that. But, Hajime confirmed that feeling of his. He wouldn't avert his eyes from Yue because of guilty feelings. Rather, he had the confidence that he could say to Yue right from the front something that was relatively pathetic like, 'I'm scared of being rejected in my homeland, so comfort me with Yue's presence'.

That was because he understood that his existence wasn't perfect, therefore he would rely on his beloved partner for the part he was lacking at or his ugly part. In certain meaning, it was something that brought about an immense trust. If it was Yue, he could even say something spoiled like that from his mouth, it could even be looked at as speaking fondly of a loved one.

The black Hajime that was hit with such sweet emotions of love emitted together with Hajime words was...

{... At the very least say that it's ten percent.}

Even though the black Hajime should be Hajime itself, he was making an exasperated face. Surely that was the reaction of the part that was not Hajime which was planted in it to function as a test of the great labyrinth. Truly what an impolite fellow, to mistakenly read the love of Hajime toward Yue like this.

Hajime ignored that black Hajime and stepped in all of a sudden. Their respective Donner and Schlag rushed about in super close range at all directions.

As always it was an offense and defense that rivaled each other like a mirror. But, that equilibrium was gradually beginning to crumble. The red flash Hajime fired, his kick, crossbit, chakram, the built-in weapon of the artificial arm, all of those began to catch the black Hajime.

{Guh, what's going on... even though there is no sign I'm getting weakened-}

"Hm? Weakened?"

{-, this is a trial to surpass oneself. The more you overcome the negative

emotion you harbor, I who am the negative image will be weakening. Conversely, the more you avert your eyes, the stronger I become.}

"Hah, so there is that kind of rule."

Finally, Hajime's Donner blasted away the black Schlag. It fell on the ground and rolled far away while rotating all over. Giving it a glance, Hajime's Schlag thrust at an opening and gouged the flank of the black Hajime.

Unable to endure that, the black Hajime stumbled while withdrawing back.

{But, you are not conquering your negative emotion. You are just merely putting off the problem and getting defiant. The proof of that is how I'm not weakening... yet, why are you surpassing me-! Even though I am you-!}

"More accurately, you are just me when we first faced each other, right?"

{What are you-, -, talking about-!}

Even more, the black Donner was pulverized together with the right arm of the black Hajime. He fired the shotgun in the artificial arm, but Hajime easily dodged and fired his railgun into the elbow joint while they passed each other, destroying it.

The two Hajime took distance and faced each other once more. However, the black one was already full of wound all over his body. His gaze was filled with doubt.

"You don't get it? A false image of you is made from the information that was read from me. That is likely the information from when I entered the labyrinth until I arrived in front of the ice pillar in this room. In other words, you are nothing more than me of dozens of minutes before. Then, right now, in this battle, I just need to be stronger than me of dozens of minutes ago. That's all."

{Impossible... something like that}

"If you are me, then don't deny me. Discovering means of survival in the

middle of mortal combat. Even if it's just a fraction stronger, just a fraction of a second faster, just a single more drop of magic power, just predicting half a step further, if I can surpass the opponent just by that much I can survive. All this time, I have come this far by getting the better of mortal combat in that way. Isn't that right?"

The black Hajime that got taken aback for a while relaxed his shoulders after a second. And then he made a wry smile while gathering the crossbits at his surrounding and took the stance of bare-handed fighting.

{Certainly, that's true... good grief, so there is a guy that'll breakthrough this trial not by 'overcoming' but by being 'defiant'. Even though if you just get agitated, then there will be a chance of victory for me still.}

"Don't say something stupid. Since the beginning, you haven't got any chance of victory. A false image is after all just a false image. I'm going to smash up that irritating face."

{That's masochism you know?}

Immediately after that, just like at the beginning of the battle, a thunderous roar rang out. But, the result was strikingly apparent.

The lower body of the black Hajime has blown away, he collapsed while flickering like heat haze, vanishing away. There was no more word, however, that expression looked satisfied somehow.

Hajime who breathed out deeply dispelled his continued alertness... for now he gave the final blow off three bullets at the head of the vanishing black Hajime. The twitching black Hajime became a pale light for sure this time and vanished. At the end, 'Read the mood, you damn bastard.' It felt like he heard something like that, but that was surely just his imagination, no doubt of that.

Hajime stored Donner in his holster, at the same time a part of the room's wall suddenly melted, there a passage appeared.

"Yue and others are... well, they must be fine."

Along with that murmur, Hajime advanced into the passage.

By the way, whether Kouki and company were included in that ‘they must be fine’... it could be easily guessed.

Chapter 143 : Shizuku's True Feelings

*

The fierce sound of clashing blades resounded through the large space where a huge round ice pillar was standing at the center.

"HAAAAAAH!"

{Oh, your swordsmanship is disarrayed again, you know?}

Along with spirit-filled war cry, she unleashed a quick god-like sword draw. Several streaks of black lines drew through the air in an instant, but not a single one of those sharp sword flashes reached the opponent.

Instead, the opponent who mocked her swordsmanship nearly struck her in the forehead with a weaving thrust. She somehow avoided it by twisting her head, but a shallow cut was left on her temple.

"-, 'Scorching Wave'!"

The thrust that almost hit her before was one of Yaegashi's own techniques. Therefore, Shizuku understood better than anyone that the thrust consisted of three stages. Her temple was cut, and it was difficult to evade with her slightly disarrayed posture.

Before the approaching flash of the second thrust could gouge her, Shizuku pushed her sheath on the ground and scattered the shockwave. The ice shards of the smashed ground changed into improvised buckshot and she somehow escaped from range.

{It's great that you have the present from him, isn't it? If you didn't have that, you would have been dead against me since some time ago, wouldn't you?}

"Haa haa..."

Against the white Shizuku who was sheathing her white katana while teasing her, the black ponytailed Shizuku kept silent while her shoulders heaved.

Currently, Shizuku was fighting her false image much like Hajime had.

The false image she faced was different with Hajime's in that it was really white. White hair in a ponytail and skin that was like white porcelain. Her blade and clothes were also all white. Her piercing reddish black eyes were awfully eye-catching.

That white Shizuku opened her mouth while showing a sarcastic expression and wearing a wide grin that was unimaginable coming from the usual Shizuku. It had been like this since a while ago. The content of her speech was naturally the exposition of Shizuku's negative emotions.

{It hurts? Painful? Scary? Do you want to cry? You don't need to hide it, you know? I am you, so I understand everything. Yes, everything.}

It had been fifteen minutes since the battle began. During that time, Shizuku's blade didn't strike once. The white Shizuku still looked clean.

In contrast, although she barely evaded a fatal wound just now, Shizuku had shallow cuts all over her body. She was soaked wet with sweat and blood. Even now, the blood flowing from her temple and cheek was trickling down drop by drop from her slender chin.

{Actually, I didn't want to do something like learning the sword. Rather than wearing Japanese clothes or a dojo uniform, I wanted to wear cute and frilly western clothes. Rather than carrying a bamboo sword, dolls and glittery accessories are far better.}

"... Shut up."

The first time Shizuku was guided by her grandfather to swing a bamboo sword was when she was four years old. Her grandfather was the head of the Yaegashi family and inheritor of ancient sword style, Yeagashi-style. Surely, he made Shizuku swing the bamboo sword only for fun. But, of all the things to happen, the four-year-old Shizuku displayed a glimpse of her talent.

The grandfather who realized that her cute granddaughter inherited a talent for the style broke out from his usual sour look. Even now, Shizuku clearly remembered how happy her grandfather's smile was.

Since that day, sword art and kendo practice became a part of Shizuku's

life. Her grandfather, her father, and everyone in the dojo too, all of them praised how amazing she was...

But, actually...

{That time when Kouki entered the dojo, I thought that a prince had finally arrived. 'I will protect Shizuku-chan too', I think? I dreamed of a cool boy that would say that to me like in a picture book story. If it's him, then he can make me a girl. He will protect me. He will spoil me. I was thinking that. But, you see?}

"Shut up."

While clenching her teeth hard, Shizuku's figure turned hazy using 'No Beat', stepping in with god speed and drawing her sword. A flash of space ruptured – 'Flash Blossom' drew its track through space itself to bisect the white Shizuku, but a white track that drew exactly the same trajectory perfectly neutralized it.

Not giving up, Shizuku further unleashed her slashes, but everything was evaded, blocked, and her opponent didn't miss an opening to increase Shizuku's wounds.

{What Kouki brought about was only jealousy toward you. Isn't that right? Kouki was overflowing with a sense of justice and kindness since elementary school. He did everything skillfully and became the target of all of the girls' attention. You who swung bamboo sword even though you are female, your short hair, your plain clothes, you who couldn't talk about girly topics, by being at the side of such a Kouki made the girls unable to tolerate it. Yes, yes, even now I remember those words. The words said to me by one of the girls who liked Kouki. 'You are a girl?' she said. That was shocking, right?}

"Just shut your mouth!"

The bitter memory from elementary school revived in the back of Shizuku's brain. At that period, her hair was cut short to practice the sword. A lot of her clothes were also plain. Her beauty over cuteness was certainly weakened related to girlishness.

With such a Shizuku, there was no way the girls would stay quiet if she was together with Kouki, who was popular since he was elementary school student. Shizuku received the jealousy of other children who didn't know mercy and moderation due to their young age. Even among those, those words were something she couldn't forget even now. Putting aside her external appearance and her sword skill, Shizuku's inside was exactly a girl. For such a Shizuku, those words were a large bitter shock.

Once, she had asked for help from Kouki. But, at that kind of time it was settled what Kouki was going to say. He would say, "Surely, they didn't mean any ill will", "Everyone is a good kid, you know?", "They will understand if you talk to them", etc, etc. Exactly like those words, Kouki spoke with the girls about their attitude towards Shizuku. It went without saying that the harsh treatment towards Shizuku got stronger. Furthermore, the concealment so that Kouki wouldn't realize such things happened increased all the more.

Even when Shizuku consulted Kouki, what Kouki returned to her was only a troubled smile. Before she knew it, Shizuku stopped relying on Kouki.

Such a living continued throughout her period of elementary school. If she didn't meet Kaori, who stayed by her side when she entered middle school, perhaps her heart would have broken and she would have abandoned everything.

{Even though I actually hated it, it was scary to betray my family's expectation and I couldn't stop learning the sword. Even though Kouki was the cause, I couldn't distance myself to push my childhood friend who didn't have a single speck of ill will because of my guilt... truly, you are an indecisive and half-baked girl.}

"-such a thing-!?"

The sword of the white Shizuku severed gravity using 'Multi Flash' and brought Shizuku a moment of weightlessness and suspension. At that moment, the sheath the white Shizuku was holding was swung horizontally. Along with that, 'Scorching Wave' was also invoked. White

ripples of magic power spread. An impact with pain enough to almost blow away Shizuku's consciousness attacked her exposed defenseless side. Her body was blown away grandly.

Shizuku bounced several times on the ground before she somehow came to a stop while sliding on the floor.

"Gohoh, gehoh."

Blood was spat out in a splatter from her coughing mouth. She felt intense pain from her ribs. Two or three of her bones had obviously been broken. It seemed that the impact injured her internal organs. In some way or another, she fastened her consciousness that was departing to the beyond.

Brisk footsteps resounded toward Shizuku, who couldn't immediately stand up. It was just like a countdown that notified her of approaching death. Impatience floated across Shizuku's expression while she struggled to stand up desperately.

The white Shizuku sweetly whispered to that agonized Shizuku with a kind tone, her mouth splitting open like a crescent moon. She was like a demon.

{It's fine even if you don't stand up anymore, you know? Someone else will clear this labyrinth even without you suffering like this. If you do that, you can go home. It's fine. Even if you give up here, I won't take your life. If you sleep just like this, by the time you wake up, everything will be over.}

"What, are you..."

{Just giving a choice... Of course, if you don't give up, I'll kill you. I'll slice you apart without mercy.}

The white Shizuku's wide grin could make somebody tremble in fear. The naked white blade in her hand was sticky with the proof of how it had shredded Shizuku. The blood trickling through it looked as though it was flowing through white snow. From the tip that was pointed at Shizuku for show, drop by drop of her own blood dripped down. Looking

at that scene, the crouching Shizuku's expression turned pale.

But, the next moment *KI-!* Shizuku glared back at her false image without paying attention to the blood spurting from her wounds. She began to fill her limbs with strength.

"Guh, uaAAAAH!!"

{... I see. That's right, isn't it? If it's you, then you will stand up, isn't it?}

The white Shizuku nodded once, her eyes narrowed quietly, and she swung down the thin white blade. It was blocked by Shizuku's black blade while she was on her knees raising a war cry.

Simultaneously,

"Fly, 'Far Sky'!!"

By using a skill for the sake of pulling things apart, Shizuku somehow blew away the white Shizuku and bought some distance. The white Shizuku twirled in the air and landed gracefully on the ground with a somersault like a cat. Shizuku stood up while giving it a glance.

"You are annoying, yapping like that. You just keep saying incomprehensible things. I won't accompany you in such a psychological battle."

{Psychological battle, huh? So you won't acknowledge your own feelings until the end. Until this year, you kept being stubborn like that. You made your surrounding stay quiet by your strength, constantly paying attention to someone... so that you aren't even aware that you are actually wishing to lean on someone...}

"Do you not hear I'm saying that you are noisy!?"

Shizuku charged without even a little of her usual calmness. There was no tactic or anything. She was merely swinging her sword unsightly through the air with reckless swordsmanship. Her feeling of wanting to shut up the opponent was clear to see.

The false image was created by reading the negative emotion of the target and using that as the base. And then if the exposed emotion wasn't

accepted by the target, the false image's strength would rise without end. In reverse, if the target accepted her own fault then the false image would be weakened... but the current Shizuku was in the former state.

Therefore, with her heart disarrayed, Shizuku's sword attack was already like child's play against the white Shizuku, whose strength increased.

The white Shizuku lightly handled the full might of Shizuku's technique and beat her down in reverse with a polished sword technique. The injury on Shizuku's flank, the damage to her internal organs, and the blood loss made Shizuku's movement dull, causing her injuries to increase further. That turned into impatience which made her grow violent and made her movement even duller. It was a vicious cycle.

To add insult to injury against such a Shizuku, the white Shizuku opened her mouth with a laugh.

{That time when you arrived in this world you were also like that, right? In truth, you were full of anxiety. You were scared from the bottom of your heart when you were Ishtar told you about the subjugation of the devil race. The night when you first killed a monster, you cried in a place where no one could know it. The feeling of cutting flesh wouldn't disappear. The blood clinging to your skin felt like it wouldn't go away. You were hiding many times trying to wash it off, weren't you?}

"Haaa-!!"

Shizuku tried to drown the words of the false image with her spirited yell. But, that act itself expressed Shizuku's denial, because she couldn't accept it, the difference in strength between them opened even farther.

{That time when Nagumo-kun fell into the abyss, if you didn't pour all your strength into consoling the deranged Kaori, surely, the one who would be crushed by terror would be you. Since that day, when you felt a real death, all the time, toward the terror of death, toward the terror of killing... you continued to be afraid.}

"Aguh!?"

The white Shizuku's 'Lightning Blossom' burst, paralyzed Shizuku's body. Taking that opening, a white flash caressed Shizuku's neck. pushu-! With that sound, fresh blood scattered out.

Thanks to Shizuku enfolding herself in 'Scorching Wave' and blowing away their bodies to open a distance, she managed to barely dodge a fatal wound. But blood was flowing like a river from between Shizuku's fingers pressed against her neck. Her carotid artery wasn't cut, but even so, it was a wound on her neck. The bleeding was quite a lot.

A clear vision of death floated in her brain. An overwhelming terror and despair began to assault Shizuku's heart. The emotion that she desperately suppressed leaked out and her hand that was holding the black katana was clattering.

The white Shizuku's lips that looked excessively red split open widely. Sticky words flowed out like a muddy stream.

{Hey, you. You were happy at that time, weren't you?}

"Eh?"

That sudden question made Shizuku leak out a dumbfounded voice while still pressing on her neck.

{I'm talking about that time Nagumo-kun came to save your class. You understand, right? There is no way you can forget that most dramatic moment in your life.}

"What are you saying..."

{A life threatening and despairing pinch... no? At that time, you had given up for certain. You were going to accept the unreasonable death and gave up everything. You didn't believe that anyone would come saving you gallantly in this world... Because of that, that red radiance, that large back, that overwhelming power without any match, it stole your heart.}

"Yo, you're wro-..."

If felt like something that she didn't want to recognize by any means,

that she mustn't recognize no matter what was going to be said. Shizuku immediately tried to yell words of rejection. But, as though to tell her that such resistance was pointless, the white Shizuku mercilessly declared.

{That time when Kaori was killed was also like that. If you aren't aware yourself, then I'll say it. At that time, for the first time since you came to this world, you 'clung'. You clung to Nagumo-kun. To such a you, he said 'believe me and wait'. And then he really answered your expectation. Just like you believed, he saved your best friend along with your heart. Since that day, you kept desperately averting your eyes, but... now, you won't be able to lie to yourself anymore.}

"Stop it, you are wrong. I'm..."

Toward Shizuku, who was shaking her head like a kid refusing something, the false image thrust the truth that she couldn't possibly escape from.

{You————love Nagumo-kun.}

"..."

Shizuku's throat was clogged. Her head was still shaking left and right in denial. She didn't even have the composure to be bothered by the blood flowing from her cut neck.

The reason was because that was an emotion that she absolutely mustn't recognize. Because that was an unforgivable feeling, a proof of the worst betrayal.

Toward Shizuku, whose mind had been cornered so much that she didn't even have the leeway to say a word of denial, the false image gently sent her the finishing blow. It was as though she was sending her a flower for the departed.

{Geez you, to fall in love with the beloved person of your best friend ——This traitor.}

"..."

Shizuku's knees lost strength. She only just supported herself enough

with the black katana that she didn't fall on her knees, but the light of determination was disappearing from her eyes.

The words thrust into her heart... were just that severe.

It was really hard to control this thing called a heart. It was not an exaggeration to call a person who could perfectly control their own heart as abnormal. It was the same with the feeling of liking another person, something that couldn't be explained with logic. That was why, even if Shizuku fell in love with Hajime just like Kaori, it was an exaggeration to call her a betrayer just from having that feeling.

But, the white Shizuku——Shizuku's negative emotion, the depth of her heart, her own feeling stated that she was a 'betrayer'.

Perhaps, that originated from the honesty that Shizuku had by nature, and her undying gratitude and good will toward her most important best friend who she snuggled up to at her most bitter period.

Her feelings for her treasured Kaori were too strong that she couldn't forgive herself just by liking Hajime. Not to mention the various faces she showed to Hajime from her uncontrollable emotion. The smiling face from her heart, her clingy and miserable face, her charming face watching in a daze, her sulky face, and even her relieved sleeping face... all those happening in a place where Kaori didn't know. Such a thing was also a reason that spurred her guilty feeling.

{Furthermore, you attacked Shia, didn't you? Why was that, I wonder? Why it wasn't Yue or Kaori but Shia, why do you think?}

"I, am..."

{The answer is simple. You envy Shia, don't you? You understood from the start that you cannot win against Yue, so you don't even feel jealous of her. There is no way you can attack Kaori no matter how jealous you are at her. That's why, you selected that girl as the target of your attack. The one who was recognized by him as a lover and the easiest one to envy... You really are a coward aren't you?}

"..."

Already, she couldn't hope to avert her eyes. The enemy before her eyes wouldn't allow that. Each timed word pierced her like an arrow. It also shot through her words of rebuttal and broke it apart. Strength was leaking out from under her feet. In contrast, the white Shizuku was overflowing with bountiful strength.

As the proof of that, the white Shizuku stepped in with 'No Beat' and unleashed a kick that scooped up Shizuku from below, not permitting her to react at all.

"Gahah!?"

Against Shizuku, whose breath was forced out and her body floating in the air, countless slashes assaulted her like a pouring rain. At an unconscious level, Shizuku lifted her black katana as a replacement for a shield, but there was no way such a thing could block everything...

"AAAAAAAAH!?"

Her whole body was chopped up to the heart's content of white Shizuku. The white Shizuku struck the sheath at the shrieking Shizuku as though making doubly sure. Shizuku was blown away fiercely as though she was run over by a dump truck and her back struck the ice wall. The ice wall at her back was pulverized in a radiating shape.

All the air in her lungs was forcefully spat out due to the impact that made her whole body act like a ragged cloth. The pain came from so many slash wounds that she didn't understand anymore where the pain come from. Shizuku's body informed her that it was at the limit. Just like that, Shizuku's body slid down the ice wall and now she was in a sitting down posture with her back reclining on the ice while her four limbs splayed open.

Blood stickily stuck on the ice wall, even the ground started to have a puddle of blood gathering there. With hazy eyes, Shizuku was staring at her other self calmly approaching her. Her body couldn't move, the piling up burden on her mind was sapped of any will to move.

{Even your absurd life that kept pulling out the short stick will have the curtain closed here. The reason for this comes as a result of your own

hand, you're truly foolish.}

Shizuku didn't respond. She was quiet as she looked up at the white Shizuku. From an appearance with wounds all over her body without even twitching, she even looked like she had expired already.

{Is there something you want to say in your last moment, I wonder? I'll carve it in the ice wall for you. Each of the spaces are connected to each other in this place, so if your luck is good someone who breaks through their trial might arrive here and find you last will you know?}

"..."

Shizuku didn't respond. In exchange, at her cheek, tear drops were flowing down. Grains of light were silently tracing her cheeks, creating a stain on her lap drop by drop.

Shizuku herself wasn't clear just why tears were overflowing like this. Was she in terror because she sensed her own death? Was she in despair that she would lose her future? Was it from the mortification of all the things said to her? Was it from the sadness of being unable to meet her important people anymore... or possibly, from all the above?

While staring down wordlessly, white Shizuku drew back her naked blade tightly behind. She took a crouching posture, her hand that was holding the sheath stuck out in aim. Its target was Shizuku's head.

The sharpness of the white katana was the same as the black katana. It was possible to have her life ended without feeling any pain by piercing through her forehead.

The sudden swelling killing intent and the finishing blow was right in front of her eyes.

In front of the tip that was aiming at her, something inside Shizuku was welling up. Her mouth flapped and closed, trying to express that emotion without caring of her own reputation or appearance.

"... I, still... don't want... to die."

{...}

There was no way anyone would listen to those words here. It was merely earnest words that wished to live. That she still didn't want to die. She wanted to meet... Her best friend, her comrades, and then, the person she fell in love with at this land of another world. One more time.

But, she wasn't able to stand up by herself anymore. Because both her body and her heart were completely tired.

That was why...

"He... lp, me... some, one... he, lp, me... please..."

She wished for help while crying like a child. Shizuku was always someone at the side being relied on, clung on, and then she always gave help to those people. She had never done something like complaining, asking for help to anyone while crying, saying that she couldn't do it anymore, that she couldn't stand it anymore.

In reality, she dreamed of being 'a girl that was protected like a princess', but while she kept looking for that, she was compelled by necessity to polish herself, and then her role became like the knight instead. Before she knew it, she even tolerated this version of herself without any dissatisfaction, however... as expected...

{How unfortunate. To use those words is too late already.}

Her true feeling that leaked out at the very end was drowned by her merciless other self.

And then, the sublime killing intent was emitted from the white Shizuku. Shizuku reflexively closed her eyes tightly. The brutal white blade thrust straight toward that forehead, to pierce her life.

...

...

“?”

{... This is impossible.}

No matter how much time passed her death didn’t arrive. The moment she closed her eyes, she felt like her back got light all of a sudden, but rather than something like that, right now her attention got attracted to the dumbfounded voice of the white Shizuku.

Shizuku timidly opened her eyes.

Over there was...

“Eh, eh?”

“Geez, what’s with this timing? Don’t tell me this is the aim of the great labyrinth itself.”

There was the white tip that stopped just before it touched her skin and the metallic arm that kept it there. With creaking sounds, a metallic artificial arm she had seen before was reaching out from behind her that firmly grasped the white blade, stopping the killing blade a hair breadth from Shizuku.

The complaint that she could hear at the same time made Shizuku opened her eyes wide, and she looked back over her shoulder. Over there was a passage where the ice wall had disappeared before anyone realized, Hajime who seemed like he came out from there appeared, crouching to support the sitting Shizuku with an embrace.

“Na, Nagumo, kun?”

“... Chih, you are too beaten up.”

Hajime looked down at Shizuku in a bad mood, next he glared at the white Shizuku with a beastly sharp glint. And then red spark ran from the artificial hand grasping the white katana. Immediately after that, the artificial hand began to vibrate with super high speed that it blurred.

KIIIIIIIIII!!

{-this-}

A peculiar running sound could be heard. At the same time, the white blade creaked and cracked. The dumbfounded white Shizuku returned to her senses with 'hah' and pulled back trying to recover her katana but... in the next moment, the white katana was pulverized from halfway as though it was crushed.

Without stopping Hajime aimed his artificial hand straight at the white Shizuku and from its palm explosive slug bullet was fired. Fierce impact attacked the white Shizuku along with a red ripple, blowing her far away.

Furthermore, Hajime took out crossbits and let them fly to the white Shizuku to assault her. He didn't have any intention of killing her because this wasn't Hajime's battle. Until the end, it was only buying time.

To separate the two parties, seven crossbits fired buckshot while taking skilled cooperation. While feeling like the thunderous roar was far away, Shizuku stared fixedly at the face of Hajime who was supporting her back from behind.

It was as though she was seeing a dream, that actually she had been killed and the Hajime in front of her eyes was just a phantom her brain showed her before she died or something. She feared that in the next moment, he would vanish.

Hajime took out a tube container from his 'Treasure Warehouse' while Shizuku was like that. He opened the lid and without reservation, he thrust it into the mouth of Shizuku that was opened absentmindedly.

"Nmuh!?"

"Don't spit it out. Drink up like your life depended on it."

Shizuku's eyes darted and she almost reflexively spat out the foreign object that suddenly entered her mouth. So that wouldn't happen, Hajime embraced Shizuku even tighter to make her unable to resist while forcefully making her drink the god water.

Shizuku panicked for a moment, but being hugged tightly by Hajime where his warmth was transmitted to her made her stiffen with a snap this time. While holding the tube in her mouth, she stared hard at the

face of Hajime which was at a really close distance. Finally, she was able to comprehend that it was a reality, and she had been saved by a hair's breadth. She became unable to avert her gaze as though she was imprisoned by Hajime's eyes.

Before long the body of Shizuku who had gulped down all the god water was healed completely from all the wounds covering her body as though everything was just a lie. However the blood she lost couldn't be recovered without using regenerative magic, so it didn't change how weak her body was.

"You are really... Nagumo-kun?"

"Do I look like anything else?"

"Bu, but, why, why are you, here, I..."

"Calm down. I finished my own trial and when I went through the passage that appeared, I came out here. Most likely each space is connected to each other. Well, I thought it's just too good to be true that I came out behind Yaegashi though."

"The, then, Nagumo-kun really is, I..."

Perhaps because the pain of her body had vanished, and she felt for real that she had escaped death, this time tears of relief overflowed from her eyes. And then, with her body still embraced, as though to ascertain his existence, it was as though she could see nothing else but Hajime. Shizuku's hand slowly reached out at Hajime's cheek. However, just before her hand touched, her expression warped painfully and her hand drew back.

Furthermore, as though to say that being hugged by Hajime mustn't happen, she weakly pushed on Hajime's chest and tried to take distance. She rubbed away her overflowing tears with her sleeve and averted her face completely from him.

Looking at Shizuku's state that was obviously strange, Hajime guessed that she was considerably humiliated by her false image, he gave a glance at white Shizuku who crossed sword with the crossbits using her white

katana that should have been broken but now had been recovered and opened his mouth.

“Come on, all your wounds have been recovered completely. Now is the time for a revenge match. Beat her quickly.”

“a. Bu, but, I... I cannot win against that, so...”

Shizuku looked at Hajime with clinging gaze while making an excuse. That appearance from Shizuku that he had never seen before made Hajime looked at the sky thinking “This is not just getting humiliated, even her heart is broken!” He thought that among the four of Kouki’s group that she was the strongest mentally, so honestly, this was unexpected.

The white Shizuku took advantage of the crossbits’ opening and gradually closed the distance. There was no meaning if Hajime defeated it, so the crossbits were moving in a half following pattern, it seemed the white Shizuku was predicting that.

Shizuku showed a frightened look from seeing her approaching white self.

It wasn’t like herself. That appearance was really not like her at all. Possibly, this was her true... Hajime frowned at the scared Shizuku that couldn’t stand up and matched his gaze with her stooped gaze. And then he began to stare at her with an extremely serious face.

“Na, Nagumo-kun? Err, that fellow is...”

“Yaegashi. Don’t worry.”

“Eh?”

Shizuku was flustered toward the approaching enemy, but to be told that while being stared straight with a serious face made blood unconsciously gathered in her face.

In front of such a Shizuku, Hajime abruptly took out a certain thing from his ‘Treasure Warehouse’.

That was...

“Now, take this. This is the ‘Masked Pink—Mark II’ I made for you.”

“… Nagumo-kun?”

While giving a scornful look and feeling angry towards why that thing came out right here, she unintentionally forgot her weak mind. The elaborately designed pink full face mask was forcefully pushed on her. Seeing that showy mask suddenly come out and now being pushed at her real body, even the white Shizuku reflexively stopped in vigilance.

Giving white Shizuku a glance, Hajime kept presenting the Masked Pink–Mark II persistently at Shizuku.

“Nagumo-kun! This is not the time for screwing around! That fellow is coming here!”

“Excuse me. I’m not screwing around at all here. Listen well, if you wear this powered up Masked Pink then your perception ability will be increased by three times. With this, you can win even against that.”

“Wh, what a pointless high-spec like usual…”

“Now you want it right? If you are saying that you cannot win without this, then take it without reservation.”

“I don’t need it! I can win even without wearing that kind of thing! Rather, if I wear that kind of thing I’ll be fighting like mad! Who can bear being treated like a degenerate for the second time because of that thing!”

With a cramped expression, Shizuku fiercely objected at Hajime who was emphasizing his prized item with a serious face. Shizuku rubbed at her temple as though she was enduring a headache.

That gesture and her tone were just like her usual self. Hajime grinned widely at Shizuku who was glaring at him even now and easily stored the Masked Pink–Mark II back into his ‘Treasure Warehouse’. And then, he said to the dumbfounded Shizuku.

“That’s right. You can win, even without this kind of thing.”

“-, I, I am…”

Even while making a face as though she was chewing a bitter bug from

how easily she got provoked by Hajime's incitement, Shizuku couldn't say anything. Ignoring that, Hajime added more to his words.

"Yaegashi. Don't forget. That thing is certainly another of your faces, but it's not everything there is to you. It's nothing more than a part made up from your negative emotion. The important feeling should be possessed by the Yaegashi Shizuku in front of my eyes right now. Isn't that right?"

"The thing... possessed by me..."

Memories overflowed in Shizuku's brain. That was her family's smile from the bottom of their heart each time she grew. The time when she helped someone together with Kouki and the group. The time when the person they helped thanked them from their heart, how she was able to meet Kaori exactly because of that painful time. And all the other many things that were hard to throw away that she couldn't forget, filled with warmth and gentleness.

Just why she couldn't remember even a little of those until now... the answer was obvious. That was due to the whispering voice she was hearing since they stepped foot into this great labyrinth little by little guiding her consciousness.

Light of determination returned into Shizuku's eyes. Suddenly lit up light was flowing into Shizuku's four limbs.

"You giving in to the words of that kind of fellow, is also the proof that you are properly facing it. After all, a real good for nothing will only become defiant hearing that. What's left, is what do you want to do? That's all. You are just too serious. Just accept it more irresponsibly, irresponsibly. After all, for the time being if you just survive then later on you can deal with it no matter how many times, anyway you like it."

"Nagumo-kun..."

'By the way, I'm in a good-for-nothing side' Hajime said while shrugging his shoulders, at the same time he began to collect his crossbits back. Him buying time was enough already.

While feeling the gaze of Shizuku staring at him, Hajime leaned on the ice wall and crossed his arms. And then he sent her his words while staring back straight at her. Hajime himself didn't do it intentionally, but surely those words were the ones that Shizuku wanted the most.

"I'll be watching here."

"..."

"You can just keep challenging it until you win. As long as I'm here you won't die. I won't let you die. It's fine."

"... that's... the clincher." (TN: The most accurate meaning is, phrase that brings someone around, esp. in personal relationships)

Those last words were words that were only inside her mouth that didn't reach even the ear of the person herself. Naturally, it shouldn't reach Hajime but, sure enough, what kind of expression would he make if he heard that? Shizuku imagined it, and then she leaked out a chuckle thinking that surely he would make a troublesome expression.

And then, she thought that surely Aiko-sensei and Liliana were also like her without a doubt, to fall in love with this kind of nasty man, it made her feeling strangely amused about just what was wrong with her.

It felt like the her until just now was all lie. She stood up with a light leap as though her body was like a feather. And then, she hugged the black katana that was a present from Hajime tightly in her breast before facing her standing still false image with a determined expression.

With her back toward Hajime, Shizuku asked silently, but with sweetness somewhere in her tone.

"... You will be looking, right? At me."

"Yeah."

"You will protect me when I need it right?"

"Yeah."

"I see. Then... I'm going."

“Ou. Go get her.”

Her lost blood wasn’t recovered back. In truth, even now she felt like fainting from blood loss. But, her steps were far more certain even compared to when she first entered this space.

She faced her false image. The white Shizuku was silently waiting with a sheathed blade.

{Really, flirting in front of the enemy? That’s a really good face you have there.}

“Is that so? This is thanks to Nagumo-kun. We aren’t flirting. Though I think it will be great if we can do that.”

{My, my, as I thought you are betraying your best friend. And then, to your rival in love you...}

“Let’s stop this unproductive talk. There is no meaning in this soliloquizing. I’ll survive, then meet Kaori and others one more time. Everything else will start from there.”

{...}

That unshakable Shizuku shut up the white Shizuku. And then she noticed how her strength was weakening little by little. In other words, Shizuku was aware of her own emotion and she began to accept that...

“Perhaps I will have a dispute with her, that I will make her feel a horrible shock. She might even scorn me. But, I won’t give up. I’ll show you that I can haul in the best result for me. I’ll challenge it no matter how many times. I absolutely won’t give up.”

{In the end, you are going to be a fighting woman then?}

“I guess. But, seventeen years, I have been living that long like that until now so it’s too late already. Certainly, I have lived until now by stifling down various things, but what I obtained as the result of that, is also an important thing that I cannot abandon already. And then, I believe that surely from now on too I will obtain the lovelier things... Because it seems, that even a fighting woman can be protected by someone that is

far stronger than me.”

{Until the end, it’s still an indirect reason like, ‘because he is an important person for Kaori’ you know? No doubt about that.}

“Even so, right now, I don’t mind.”

Shizuku softly lowered her waist, she lightly drew back one of her feet with the other foot bending forward, taking the stance of quick sword draw.

“I don’t have any extra strength left. One attack. I’ll put everything in this one attack. Endure this if you can.”

{Fufu, I see. What magnificent spirit. Really what a timing he appeared at. Someone who is there at the essential time, in the essential place... I thought something like that existed only inside stories.}

Presence emitted from Shizuku sharpened to the utmost. With her body that had reached the height of fatigue due to the mental burden and bleeding, certainly, she could only put her everything in one attack. It was exactly an attack where she staked her all.

For an instant, the white Shizuku directed a wry smile at the man leaning on the wall who revived Shizuku like a phoenix at the eleventh hour. Surely that whisper was also something that Shizuku undoubtedly felt.

The white Shizuku also similarly dropped her waist and took the stance of a fast draw.

The pressure rapidly swelled up. The determination to beat the opponent emitted like it would cut apart the other by itself came from both sides respectively. Different from the chilly air, the sharp cold filled the surrounding space.

Shizuku’s heart was calm like a spring inside a deep forest. Because on her back, she felt a large presence. Because she understood that he was looking straight at her. Because she believed that when the unlikely event happened, he would protect her.

“——fuh.”

{Haah!!}

They stepped in simultaneously.

Their ponytails fluttered like falling stars, Shizuku and white Shizuku crossed each other.

And then they stayed unmoving a few meters from each other with their backs facing the other.

And, at that time, a rustled sound could be heard, Shizuku’s ponytail was undone. The string that fastened her hair was cut. Was that because of the sword slash, or perhaps it was deteriorating due to several battles...

In the midst of the tension that turned into silence filling the air, the one sheathing her katana... was Shizuku.

chin The moment the pleasant small sound of the sheath resounded, the white Shizuku slipped off smoothly. Her body was bisected into two. Like that, the figure swayed and blurred before melting and vanishing in the air. Its face looked from the side seemed to smile broadly in satisfaction.

Right after that, Shizuku’s body stumbled to the side, and she crumbled down. She became unable to stand up after her feeling slackened down due to being freed from extreme fatigue and nervousness.

But, Shizuku didn’t strike the hard ground.

“Splendid. As always, that’s admirable swordsmanship.” (TN: The kanji used in the admirable word can also be used for falling in love.)

“Nagumo-kun... fufu, you can also proceed to fall in love from there you know?”

“What are you saying?”

“My, that’s unfortunate.”

Hajime gently lowered Shizuku on the ground.

After Shizuku cracked that joke, a third path different from the passage

Shizuku passed and the path Hajime came out from melted out from the wall.

"Yaegashi, you have difficulty in walking?"

"It seems so. I need a little rest. Although, nothing can be done about the blood loss so I need regeneration magic used on me. In any case, I cannot move properly right now... and so Nagumo-kun, take care of me okay?"

"Aa?"

"Carry me in your arms okay?"

"... Yaegashi, did you change a little? Like you have no reservation anymore, or you became shameless..."

Toward Shizuku who spread open her arms demanding to be carried in his arm, Hajime only returned a slightly bewildered gaze at her. Shizuku leaked out a chuckle while enjoyably swaying her downed straight black hair.

"I'm just thinking that I'll be slightly more honest. Rather than that, let's quickly link up with everyone else. That's right. Nagumo-kun, can you create an artifact enchanted with regeneration magic I wonder? You had included that function in the black katana too but the effect is insignificant."

Hajime tilted his head toward Shizuku's change while thinking that indeed it wasn't guaranteed that anything would happen until they linked up with Yue and others, so he responded to her request because it would be better if she recovers quickly. Shizuku made a further request while he took out material from the 'Treasure Warehouse'.

"While you are at it, can you make it a hair ornament? See, my hair string was cut. It's better if it's cute. Sort of like that snow crystal you gifted for Yue and the others."

"... What a demanding fellow. It looks like you are really cutting loose on various things, huh?"

Even while complaining, Hajime thought “Well, let’s make it for the success celebration too”. He used a pearl-like crystal with a faint radiance which had high affinity with magic power, making a hairclip from that. It was like countless fruits in a row, or perhaps like drops of morning dew lining on a leaf, a row of beautiful jewels.

“It’s pretty…”

“Here, it’s fine like this right? Let’s go quickly after you wear it.”

For a while, Shizuku stared ecstatically at the regenerative hairclip created in less than a minute, but she then tied her hair in a ponytail in panic after Hajime called out at her.

“… How do I look?”

With her cheeks reddened, Shizuku looked up at him and asked that question. Seeing that Hajime’s perplexity deepened thinking that as he thought something was strange.

“… It’s falling far short of the real regeneration magic, but there was no problem when I attached regeneration magic in it to work on the flesh you see.”

“… That’s not what I’m asking, though.”

Of course, Hajime understood what Shizuku was actually asking him. However, for some reason, this exchange gave Hajime a déjà vu. It was just like, yes, it was exactly the same like the atmosphere Aiko showed him at the god mountain… yes.

Even while sighing deeply at Hajime who was playing dumb, “Well, guess it cannot be helped” Shizuku shrugged her shoulders before slowly holding out both her arms. It was wordless, and the second request for a carry.

Anyway, it was definite that Shizuku couldn’t move properly, so reluctantly Hajime was going to take out gravity stone from ‘Treasure Warehouse’, but Shizuku beat him to the punch.

“If you are planning to crucify me like before then I’m in firm

opposition to that. When we are coming out from this great labyrinth, I'll circulate Nagumo-kun's rumor as a seriously ill patient."

"..."

Of course, it was patently obvious what kind of sickness Shizuku meant based on where her gaze was looking at. His hair, eye patch, artificial arm, Shizuku's gaze was moving alternately on those things.

Hajime wordlessly returned the gravity stone. In this case, Hajime guessed that she obviously would also refuse being carried like in a stretcher. It seemed that she persistently wanted to be carried by arms.

This unusual selfishness of Shizuku was increasingly spurring the bad premonition in his chest. However, they also couldn't stay here for much longer. He also wanted to be spared from a lethal wound by Shizuku, so reluctantly Hajime crouched while showing his back in front of Shizuku's eyes.

"Muu, it's better if it's princess carry, but... it can't be helped."

'What is it that couldn't be helped', sealing such a retort at the bottom of his heart, Hajime got up while ignoring to the utmost the weight and soft sensation transmitted on his back. Wasting no time, Shizuku tightly entangled her arms around Hajime. Her body was also pressing on him as tightly as possible.

Hajime stood up, he wordlessly entered the newly appeared passage and began walking silently. He guessed that surely this passage was also connected to the space of another person.

There, a whispering voice reached him. It wasn't the whispering voice of the labyrinth. It was Shizuku's voice that contained more sweetness. She was talking into his ear in a posture where she put her head on Hajime's shoulder.

"Hey, Nagumo-kun."

"Hm? What?"

"Did you listen to the conversation between me and the other me?"

“No, I was too far, the voices of you two were also small.”

Hajime shook his head toward Shizuku’s question. Shizuku murmured “I see…”, then she showed a gesture of thinking a little about something. And then, she showed her palm in front of Hajime’s eyes while opening her mouth once again.

“This hand, it has hardened from holding a sword right? As I thought, this is not a hand of a woman.”

Hajime didn’t understand the intention of the question and his expression turned dubious, but for the time being, he sent his gaze toward the palm of Shizuku in front of his eyes. Certainly, the skin of her palm looked thick and hard. That was the proof of the many years she spent polishing her skill.

“If you said, that a soft hand without a single scratch is a ‘woman’s hand’, certainly this hand doesn’t look like that.”

“…”

“But, I think it’s a good hand.”

“… Really?”

“Yeah. Compared to the hand of someone that has never carried anything heavier than a chopstick, this hand is far prettier.”

“…”

Hearing those words, Shizuku’s exposed palm suddenly clenched tightly into a fist, hiding her palm as though it suddenly got shy. At the same time, the strength of her arm embracing him grew stronger.

“Nagumo-kun, thank you for coming to save me.”

“It’s not like I was coming to save you. That was just a coincidence.”

“Fufu, that other me said it. It was like a story in a book. Even that time in Orcus and the time in the palace was also like that. Were you actually choosing the timing?”

“Don’t talk stupid. Each time, I was just barely… no, that time with

Kaori I was late in a meaning. Anyway, there was nothing worse for the heart compared to those times. I want more surplus time for that here."

Shizuku leaked out a chuckle at the fed up Hajime.

"You see. On the inside, I am really girlish you know? Actually rather than sword art, I wanted to play house, I yearned for something like a princess that is protected by the cool boy. Even at Haltina Great Labyrinth when I was pulled into the dream world, I was a princess that experienced a love story with a knight. Though as expected, that was really a painful story that I cannot tell to anyone."

"Certainly, that must be painful."

Shizuku smiled wryly saying "There is a better way for saying that" while poking at the head of Hajime who expressed his honest impression without mercy.

"Well, you are wondering what I want to say, right? Because I am someone like that, I'm really thankful to Nagumo-kun that always came running when I was in danger, that's what I mean. When you told me that you are watching, also when you told me you won't let me die, I felt really really grateful."

"... You are exaggerating. If Yaegashi died..."

"Kaori will be sad, right? I know that. Those times weren't for me, you did those for Kaori's sake."

Shizuku cut over Hajime's words. There was no sign of self-depreciation in what she was saying. She was really just saying the truth, her air was quite indifferent.

Certainly, it was like that, but the way Shizuku said that it was like he was being seen through that "If it is for Kaori's sake you will do anything right?", that made him dissatisfied that he added some correction.

"... 80 percent is because of that."

Shizuku was puzzled. If he said that around 80 percent was for Kaori's sake then...

“And the remaining 20 percent?”

“Well, that’s because Yaegashi is a good fellow, see? I’m not going to actively try to forsake you.”

“…”

Unexpectedly, if Shizuku was in a pinch, then Hajime was going to proactively reach out his hand to her. Understanding that such feelings existed inside Hajime, Shizuku’s cheeks were slightly tinged with heat.

And then she buried her face into Hajime’s neck while sleekly dropping a bomb just like her best friend was prone to do.

“Nagumo-kun, I want to quickly meet up with Kaori. Not just Kaori, but I want to meet Yue, Shia, and Tio too. And then, I’m going to say to them that I have fallen in love with Nagumo-kun. I don’t know what is going to happen, but I want to try being a little more honest and clash ahead.”

“Is that so? If that’s the case then, let’s qui… oi, Yaegashi, just now, you.”

“Nagumo-kun, I’m a little… tired. Protect me… properly… kay”

In Hajime’s ear, soft breathing sound of a sleeper could be heard gradually. It seemed that she had fallen asleep, entrusting her body to Hajime. Her skill to leave alone a bomb right after dropping it was a deed that was exactly the same as her best friend.

Hajime frowned before fixing his hold on Shizuku while continuing to walk silently. Inside his heart, he was holding his head wondering “How does it become like this?”

Not noticing how the cheeks of Shizuku became bright red like an apple…

This is an [Ongoing] epub

Not yet translated chapters of Arc VII: 144-152

for updates check at bakanonymous.wordpress.com

Credits

~Editor~

elementalcobalt: 136-143

~Translators~

SouthBound: 136-139

Tingle: 139-141

Bakapervert: 141-143

~Arc epub version [Ongoing] + ?Cover? by bakanonymous ~